TUCK SIMMS, FORTY-NINER

EDWARD LEONARD

Urban J. J. Rock

Eureka, Mo.

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To
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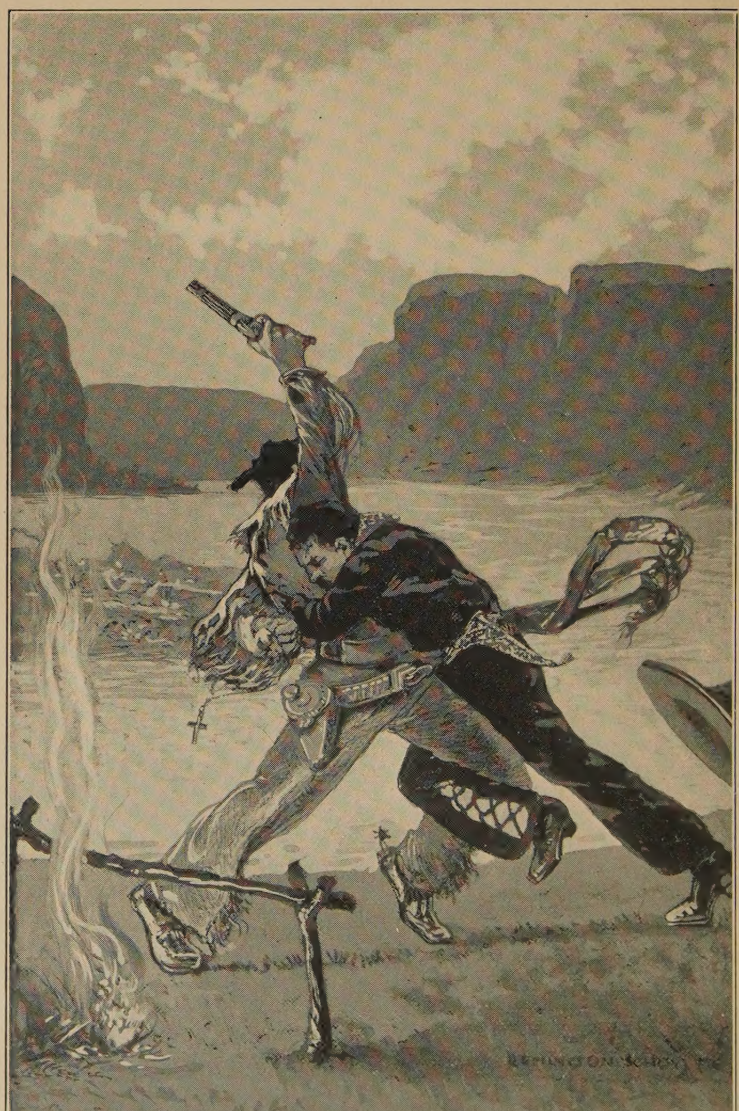
TUCK SIMMS, FORTY-NINER



"DON GONZALO, WITH A CRY, SPRANG AT HIM LIKE A WILDCAT"

Tuck Simms, Forty-Niner. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 68)

TUCK SIMMS, FORTY-NINER

BY

EDWARD LEONARD

ILLUSTRATED

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TUCK SIMMS, FORTY-NINER

CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM THE SANTA FE TRAIL

To THE East down the long road a cloud of dust was rolling toward the Eagle Tavern, where Tuck Simms was sitting on the stone steps. Tuck's gun lay across his knees, and beside him were two fat prairie hens he had shot out in the brush.

It was not often that such a mass of dust as was now holding his attention was kicked up on that lonely road, and, before taking the hens in to his mother, he meant to wait and see what was going to emerge from it. After a moment something snow white in the yellow cloud gleamed in the light of the setting sun, and the boy's sharp eyes detected the big, hooped, canvas tops of a train of emigrant wagons. Soon the whole caravan was in plain sight. A little group of men on horseback led the way, and behind them,

drawn by slow-moving oxen, Tuck counted a dozen wagons. Now he could hear the shouts of the drivers as they swung their whips, and the shrill voices of women and children.

"Gold hunters!" muttered Tuck, his eyes opening wide with excitement.

Sun-browned boys and girls and women whose faces where half hidden under huge sunbonnets peered out at him through the round openings at either end of the canvas tops as the emigrant train slowly filed past the old tavern.

Stopping his horse at the steps where Tuck was sitting, a long-haired, bearded rider demanded:

"Boy, how far to Independence?"

"Dunno," Tuck answered. "Never been there. But from my notion of it I reckon you folks will have to make camp for the night 'less you hurry."

The man swung himself to the ground, and stretched himself with a yawn. Evidently he had ridden a long way, and he seemed relieved to be out of the saddle.

"Seen any parties to-day going our way?" he inquired.

"Nary a one."

"Well, you'll see a plenty of 'em before long. Back in St. Louis there must have been two thousand wagons ready to take the trail, though that ain't half the outfitting point Independence is.

And let me tell you, sonny, there's some pretty hard citizens in the crowd that's coming, too. This gold rush is bringing the bad ones from all over the country, and, mark my words, this part of Missouri ain't any too safe nowadays for respectable folks. We heard of some pretty black doings by prowling ruffians not many miles back from here, and we passed a house where the owner had been killed for his money the night before. You better tell whoever runs this tavern about what's been going on so he'll be on his guard."

The wagon train had passed on and the man mounted his horse to follow. Casting an appraising look at the boy's bright blue eyes, shrewd face and sturdy figure, he called out:

"Goodbye, sonny. I reckon you'll be off for the gold fields yourself some time."

Tuck stood watching the caravan until it passed out of sight.

"By golly! I wish I was a couple of years older," he said to himself. "I'd be old enough then to get a job as one o' them wagon drivers. Tain't no use trying now. They wouldn't have me. And likely the gold will all be dug up before I can get there."

His hopeless yearning to join in the great gold rush which was beginning in that Spring of 1849 had been making his life bitter for weeks. De-

jectedly he picked up the hens and went inside to give them to his mother, who, after watching the wagon from a window, was getting his supper ready.

"One o' them riders has been telling me some robbers got into a house a ways down the road and killed a man," he told her. "He says there's some pretty bad characters driftin' round the country."

Widow Simms, tall and gaunt, had lived too long on the rough border to be frightened easily, but she was too sensible not to heed warnings of danger.

"I've run this tavern long enough," she said. "The country's getting too wild for a lone woman with only a boy to depend on and no neighbors near. It's time I closed up here and moved to Independence. It's a boom town now where there's lots of money to be made, and I've got close to five hundred dollars stowed away upstairs to get a start with."

"If you go to Independence," Tuck suggested, "you could get along without me, and I might get a chance to go with one o' them gold parties."

"You better wait awhile," his mother answered. "They don't want sixteen-year-old boys so long as they can get men. The trail's full of danger, and you're too young for it."

Tuck lapsed into glum silence and sat down

to his supper. It was growing dark, and the widow lit a candle and placed it on the table. When her son had finished his meal he helped her with the evening chores. Except for the boy and his mother the tavern was empty, and there was little likelihood at such an hour that any traveler would come asking for lodging. Then the widow brought her work-bag into the candle light and began to sew, while Tuck, mindful of the warning the gold hunter had given him, sat on the other side of the table cleaning his gun before loading it. Beside him lay his powder charger and bullet pouch. He was proud of his old smooth-bore muzzle loader, which was good for either ball or shot, though he knew it could not be compared to the new guns that were coming into the market, some of which were made of cast steel instead of iron and loaded at the breech. There were also big-game guns with rifled bores, the rifling being supposed to make the bullet fly straighter. Some day he meant to have a cast-steel, rifled breech-loader, as well as a double-barrelled pistol like those he had sometimes seen. A pistol that would fire two bullets without reloading would be a wonder in case of trouble.

"I reckon it's time to go to bed," said his mother at last, and she rose and went to the window to take a final survey of the road before fastening the beam across the tavern door.

"Land's sake, what a night!" she cried, as she peered through the little panes. "I can't see a thing."

There came the dismal call of an owl out of the dark, and she drew back with a shiver.

"This loneliness is sure getting on my nerves, Tuck," she said. "I'm going to move to Independence; that's certain. There's no telling what dreadful thing may happen here on some dark night like this, with the country overrun with black-hearted men that this gold rush has brought."

A low, uncertain sound just outside the door caused her to turn swiftly, every nerve alert.

"What's that!" she cried.

Both stood listening, their eyes on the door. It seemed to Tuck that the door was moving. The next moment he was sure of it. It was being pushed open almost imperceptibly and without a sound. Tuck Simms was no coward, but he felt his heart beating against his ribs.

The door opened a bit wider, and a man's face appeared—a round, red face framed in an unkempt mass of red hair.

"What you want?" Tuck demanded.

"Got anything you can give us to eat?" inquired the visitor. As he swung the door wide open another man came into view close at his heels. Each carried a gun, and the red-headed

one had a bowie knife hanging from a belt. The candle light, falling on their faces, disclosed the fact that Redhead's partner had only one eye. They were as rough-looking a pair as Tuck had ever seen.

"I don't get meals at this time of night," Widow Simms announced sharply.

"I reckon you'll get 'em for us," said Redhead.

"Well, I won't," the widow snapped back at him. "An if you don't want the law on your heads you'd better be going right now."

Redhead threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"That's a good joke, old woman. The law! Why, there ain't no law in this here country till you git to Independence, and dern little of it there."

"You needn't think I'm afraid of such a pair of knaves as you," said the widow, as her gaze wandered around the room after Tuck's gun.

Redhead laughed again.

"Me and my partner here has been hearin' a few things about you, widow, from which we calculate you ain't any too poor. We're hankerin' for food, but we got a still worse cravin' for money. Out with it, widow."

Widow Simms set her jaw in grim determination and drew her lips into a thin, straight line.

Tuck knew from thorough experience that when his mother looked like that nothing on earth could swerve her.

"You won't get a cent," she declared fiercely, "not a cent; not if you kill me."

At the same time she was thinking, "Where is that boy's gun? What has he done with it? She glanced inquiringly at Tuck, but he was staring too intently at the two intruders to notice her.

"Tain't no use arguin' with her," put in the one-eyed man. "You leave it to me. I know a way to fix her. Just you keep watch on the boy, Red."

One-eye dropped his gun on the floor, crossed the room and caught Widow Simms' hands in an iron grip. Dragging her roughly to the table, he pulled the lighted candle toward him.

"I reckon holdin' her fingers over this here flame will make her change her mind quick enough," he said.

A wave of fury swept over Tuck. No longer was he afraid of Redhead's gun; he no longer thought about it; in his fierce hatred for One-eye his own danger was forgotten as he saw his mother's hands, in spite of her struggles, being drawn slowly nearer to the flame. As a matter of fact, Redhead's attention was absorbed for the moment by his partner and the widow, and he failed to notice the boy's swift reach under

the table. He had left his gun lying there, where, with only a solitary candle lighting the room, it was too dark for the men to detect it. With both hands gripping the trusty old weapon, he drove the stock with all his strength squarely into the pit of One-eye's stomach. The man doubled up and dropped to the floor with a groan. Instantly Tuck swung his gun around to point at Redhead, and, with no time to take careful aim, pulled the trigger. There was a flash and a roar. He had missed, for Redhead stood facing him unhurt, his gun at his shoulder ready to fire.

Tuck stood as if paralyzed, staring dully at the muzzle pointing at him. He knew that Redhead, taking aim so slowly and deliberately, could not miss. He turned cold with fear.

At the instant when it seemed that Redhead must be ready to pull the trigger, Widow Simms, with a despairing cry, rushed in front of her son, shielding him with her body.

"Shoot me if you want to!" she cried, facing Redhead with flashing eyes. "Kill a woman if you're coward enough, but don't kill my only son."

"I ain't partic'ler," returned Redhead, still pointing his gun as he stood a dozen paces away at the end of the long room. "I'm li'ble to if you don't come out with that money mighty quick. And I 'low I'll either shoot that young

devil o' yourn or wallop half the life out of him before I'm done."

A slight sound from the spot where One-eye had fallen turned his attention from them for an instant. The man was recovering from the knockout blow Tuck had given him, and was reaching for his gun.

At that moment a loud report rang through the room, and, shattered by a bullet, the arm with which One-eye had grasped his weapon dropped helpless. Redhead's mouth gaped wide open in astonishment when looking at the doorway he discovered standing there a slender, black-eyed, black-haired man dressed in buckskins, who was holding a smoking pistol.

Tuck, too, was staring dumbfounded at this man who was standing there as cool and unconcerned as if such a scene as he had stepped into were a daily occurrence in his life. The man's clean-cut features plainly belonged to the white race, but his face was tanned to almost as coppery a brown as an Indian's. The broad brim of his hat was turned up in front and was fastened to the high crown with a silver buckle. Long fringes decorated the sleeves of his deerskin hunting shirt and ran down the sides of his leggings as far as his moccasined feet. The moccasins were ornamented with elaborate designs worked in colored beads. From his neck and

A SLENDER, BLACK-HAIRED MAN IN BUCKSKINS STOOD IN THE DOORWAY HOLDING A SMOKING PISTOL.

suspended from a single red-leather cord hung a perforated bullet, with a large, oblong, red bead on each side of it, such as a Crow chief wears as his "medicine" to excite the superstition of his warriors. From his broad, bead-embroidered belt hung a leather pouch. The only weapon he carried was the pistol in his hand. One single barrelled pistol—and he had already fired it. And Redhead's gun loaded!

"He's lost!" Tuck muttered to himself as he tried to steady his shaking nerves. "He ain't got a chance—not a chance!"

As the situation dawned on Redhead, his look of astonishment gave place to a broad grin. He was the master now; he was sure of it—so sure that he was in no hurry to shoot and stood with the stock of his gun resting on the floor while he gloated over the prospect.

"I got yer, stranger," he chuckled. "You better be sayin' your prayers, for I'm sure goin' to put a hole clean through yer so you'll have no more chance to go nosin' round interferin' in other folks' business."

The man in the doorway moved not so much as a muscle, but just the faintest of smiles passed over his face. It was just enough of a smile to give Tuck a ray of hope. Yet, though his wits had never been sharper than in that moment, he could not understand what chance the black-eyed

man could possibly have in this game of life and death that seemed to give him such absolute confidence.

Suddenly in the black eyes came a steely glitter, and the dark face grew as hard as flint. Then for the first time, the man spoke.

"If you know what's good for you you'll drop that gun," he said coolly.

"And s'posin' I shouldn't?" Redhead demanded.

"Well, suit yourself," returned the man in the doorway. "It don't make much difference to me either way. But, between you and me, I've got about all the reputation as a killer that I need, and I don't have any special yearning to add to it."

"Mebbe you've forgot that that little shooter of yourn is empty, stranger."

"Maybe I have. But I'll find out."

Pointing the pistol at the floor, he pulled the trigger. And—wonder of wonders!—the pistol spoke again and a bullet buried itself in the rough boards. It was surely magic.

The black eyes twinkled merrily as they saw Redhead's look of bewilderment.

"This little gun's got three balls in it for you and your partner in case you're still looking for trouble. Reckon you never heard of a revolving pistol. Kind of a new thing on the bor-

der yet, but there'll be plenty of 'em in a year or so. Just you take a bit of advice from me—don't argue with a man who carries a revolver."

Stepping quickly to Redhead, he took the thug's gun away from him and laid it on the table, his moccasined feet making not the slightest sound as he moved about the room. He picked up One-eye's weapon, placed it beside the other, then sat down in one of the chairs beside the table.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here a few minutes earlier, ma'am," he said. "I could have saved you some worry. The border's a bad place nowadays—a bad place, especially for a woman."

Widow Simms was too much concerned just then over the groaning man on the floor to have a thought for anything else.

"What are we goin' to do about him?" she inquired anxiously.

"Oh, don't worry about him," the black-eyed man answered. "We'll throw both of 'em into the woodshed or the barn presently, and I'll rope 'em up for the night. In the morning I'll take 'em to Independence and turn 'em over to the sheriff. They've left a couple of horses outside. I know I ought to have killed these two rascals, but I didn't have the heart to do it. Got any rope round the house, boy? And, by the way, Redtop, keep away from that door."

Tuck went out, and came back before long

with a coil of rope. By that time the black-eyed man had heard from the widow the story of what had happened before his arrival.

"Good boy!" he exclaimed, rising and throwing a fringed arm around Tuck's neck. "You did fine. A boy like you ought to be out on the other side of the border. How'd you like to take the gold trail?"

"The gold trail?" cried Tuck. "Will you gimme a chance?"

"Well, I'm going with Jim Coulter's party next week, and Jim's looking for wagon drivers. Don't suppose he's keen for taking boys but he'll take you if I say so."

"I guess you'll have to go, Tuck," said Widow Simms with a sigh. "I can get along without him now, mister, because I'm going to move to Independence. I don't know you nor nothing about you, but I'd bet my last dollar you're all right."

"Ever hear of Jeff Quantrell, ma'am?"

"The trader? Quantrell of the Santa Fe Trail?"

"That's me. Though the old trail won't see me any more for many a long year, I'm thinking. This California gold fever's got into my bones."

As he tipped back in his chair the two thugs, the widow and her son stared at him fascinated. To Tuck this man was like a god. Who on that

border had not heard of him? Tales of his exploits were told in every household.

"Gosh!" Tuck muttered, thrilling with excitemen. "Gosh! I'm going with Quantrell of the Santa Fe trail."

CHAPTER II

THE BULL-WHACKER'S LASH

JIM COULTER'S overland party was in camp just outside of Independence, the eastern terminal of the trail of the gold-seeking emigrants to California. It was growing dark. The twelve wagons, with their huge, hooped tops of white canvas, had been drawn up end to end in an oval, forming a corral for the mules and horses. There was a chill in the evening air, and the men of the party had started a fire of brushwood near by and were grouping themselves around it, their faces ghostly white in the glare of the leaping flames.

A mile away the oil and candle lights of the town were glimmering—more lights than Tuck Simms had ever seen before. What a wonderful place Independence was. Tuck had opened his eyes very wide when he first caught sight of it. Never before had he seen so many houses—hundreds and hundreds of them—and the throngs of people filled him with amazement. This little

pioneer center had become a boom town if there ever was one. Day after day the streets were crowded with strangers. There was never a daylight hour when a long caravan of wagons was not passing through on its westward way. The storekeepers were getting rich, the sidewalks were lined with peddlers, the forges of the blacksmiths' shops were aglow late into the night, for there were hundreds of mules and horses to be shod and hundreds of wagons to be put into condition for the two-thousand-mile journey.

Tuck Simms, as he squatted before the fire, heard the creaking of wheels and the shouts of drivers. Out of the dusk came a line of emigrant wagons, moving slowly, for they were drawn by oxen.

"Slow but sure," remarked Jeff Quantrell. "Out on the Santa Fe Trail the oxen could outlast the horses, but they took an almighty long time making the trip."

"That's the big question that everybody's arguing just now," put in Coulter. "I know oxen are less liable to break down, and the Indians can't stampede 'em when they're loose, but, mark my word, some of those ox teams won't get to the Sierras before snow time, and then, there'll be trouble."

As the first of the wagons came into the light of the fire the driver swung his lash. As every-

body in the group knew, a bull-whacker's lash was at least twenty feet long, very thick at the staff and tapering off to a point. The length of the stick to which it was attached was seldom more than eighteen inches.

The lash of this driver who was passing the fire swung in a circle, faster and faster, until the end of it came down with a loud hiss across the back of one of the two leaders of the four-yoke team. The beast quivered from the blow, and pushed forward with all its strength. Tuck knew that such a lash manipulated by an expert bull-whacker could cut like a knife clean through the hide of an ox, and, if swung by a master hand, would hit any spot it was aimed at—as cruel an instrument of torture as could possibly be devised.

"A man could come near to killing somebody with a thing like that," said Tuck.

"He's pretty handy with it," Quantrell answered. "But I've seen better. Out on the Santa Fe Trail there was a bull-whacker named Davy Dawson, and I've yet to find the man who could beat him swinging the lash."

In Quantrell's dark eyes was a far-away, brooding expression, and his thoughts seemed to have gone back to the old, wild trail that he had ridden so many times as a trader. Tuck, who had

seen Quantrell in that mood before, knew that a story was coming, and silently he studied the trader's shrewd, sharp-featured face.

For a few minutes Quantrell sat staring into the fire. Then, slowly, he proceeded to enlighten the minds of his companions concerning the dexterity of Davy Dawson with the bull lash. Here is the story he told:

I was only a boy at the time, and I thought it was a great chance when a man known as "Pegleg" Jones offered to take me on the trail with his caravan. His party was so big and so well armed that he had several pay passengers, who were particular about traveling safe, and one of them was a fake doctor named Sniffin, who had an elixir, a sure cure for anything from a cold in the head to heart disease, which he thought he could sell to the innocent Mexicans in Santa Fe.

The very first day out some kind of sickness got hold of the doc and laid him flat. Pegleg wanted to dose him with the elixir, but the doc wouldn't touch it, and swore the only way to save his life was to send him back to Missouri in a hurry. He had already paid two hundred dollars as his fare, but he told Pegleg he could keep the money and would get a hundred dollars

more for shipping him to the other side of the border.

Pegleg didn't fancy the proposition at first, as he couldn't see why his party should be delayed just to save a fake doc's life, but after a while he figured that, as there had been no signs of Indians, it would be safe to send him back in a light spring wagon that he had, behind a team of fast mules without an escort. He knew there was a caravan due to leave Blue Mills the next day, and that whoever drove the doc could come back with it, so the return trip would be safe anyhow. The party at Blue Mills was a small one, and their wagons were not loaded so heavily as Pegleg's, so he reasoned they would catch up with him after a few days and that he could push on without delay.

Though Davy Dawson was known as a bull-whacker, he was a first-class mule driver, too, and Pegleg picked him out to take the doc back. But Davy didn't show much liking for the job, for he knew a good deal more about that country than Pegleg did, and he wasn't a bit certain there was no danger on the thirty miles that lay between us and Westport Landing. Finally he agreed to go if somebody was sent along with him to keep a watch out of the hind end of the wagon, the doc being flat on his back and unable to be of any use. The rest of the men didn't have

any more hankering for the trip than Davy did, but I wasn't old enough to have much sense about keeping out of trouble, and I told Davy he could take me if he wanted to. He knew I was handy with a gun, and he figured that I'd be about as useful as a man, so it was agreed that Davy and I were to go.

The wagon had a canvas top spread over a set of bows and drawn up in the rear with a cord, leaving only a round hole to look through, just like an ordinary emigrant wagon, but it was a heap lighter than most rigs on the trail and we had the best pair of mules in the outfit. We lifted the doc in, piled his trunk and valise in after him, and left the big boxes of his elixir to go on with the caravan to Santa Fe, for he meant to make the trip after getting well.

No matter what kind of a team Davy might be driving, he always carried his bull lash. Of course, it wouldn't do to bring it down so hard on the back of a good mule as on an ox. An ordinary driver wouldn't have been able to use it at all, but for Davy it was handier than a mule whip. He was like a circus juggler with that lash. He would swing it out into a long, whirling spiral that would keep spinning for a long time, while his hand didn't seem to move at all. We were getting ready to start when a horsefly lit on the neck of one of the mules. Davy sent his lash

after it as quick as a shot, and squashed it. At twenty-five feet he could hit any mark that was big enough to see.

The mules seemed to know who it was that was behind them, for they set off at a terrific clip as soon as he took the reins. The pace was hard on the doc, for he was shook up considerable. He wasn't too sick to do a powerful lot of cussing about it, too, but Davy told him he wasn't going to take any chances driving slow through that kind of a country, and that he could get out and walk if he didn't like it.

After we had gone about ten miles Davy began to shrug his shoulders and twist his head from side to side nervously as he stared out over the plains.

"I'll be dog-goned if I like the look of things," he sung out. "The buffalo are grazing too far from the trail to suit me. That means Injins. We hain't seen a buffalo since we started."

"Don't go so fast," groaned the doc. "If the Indians get sight of us they'll think we're afraid and are running away from 'em."

"Huh!" answers Davy. "A lot you know about Injins. If they see us we'll be running from 'em all right. You can bet your dear life on that, doc."

Along toward the end of the trip we had crossed a little creek that runs into the Kansas.

and had left it about five miles behind, when I happened to glance back at the cottonwoods on its banks and saw some black specks creeping out from under them that looked like a flock of big birds. The next minute they rose up higher on the plain and I saw that they were men on horses.

"Hey, Davy!" I called. "Look back there at the creek. What are they?"

Davy gave a quick glance back, and the next instant brought his lash down across the backs of the mules.

"What are they, Davy?" I yelled at him again, feeling pretty nervous.

"You'll know soon enough what they are," he roared. "Get your gun ready. They're Injins."

His lash sung through the air again, and the mules broke into a wild gallop.

"I can't stand this bouncing," groans the doc. "Stop and parley with 'em. That's the way; stop and parley with 'em."

"I'll stop and throw you out if you don't shut up," snarls Davy. "Then you can do the parleyin' while they're takin' your scalp. Don't you bother me no more; I've got all I can do tendin' these here mules." And his lash went spinning out with a hiss.

After that we didn't hear much more from the doc, and the little we did hear we didn't pay

any attention to, for we were altogether too busy. In about a minute there wasn't any doubt left in my mind that Davy was right. They were Indians, sure enough, and they were coming down on us fast.

Davy called to me, "Here; you take my pistol. I can't use it. Too busy driving. That gives you two shots ready for 'em."

With my big muzzle-loader in my hands—we didn't have any breech-loaders in those days—and Davy's pistol stuck in my belt I crawled to the rear of the wagon, and crammed my mouth full of balls and patches to be ready for reloading, though I had my doubts whether I should be able to pour powder anywhere but on the floor, with the wagon swaying and bumping as it was.

Looking out through the hole in the canvas I saw about thirty savages, naked to the waist, riding down on us like mad. It turned me cold to see how easily they were gaining on our mules. Though we were going at a break-neck pace, it seemed as if we were standing still as I watched those redskins cutting down with every second the distance between us.

Pretty soon Davy called out, "How near are they now, Jeff?"

Emptying my mouth for the moment, I called back, "Not more'n a mile, I guess. They'll be here in a few more jumps. We can't get away."

My voice was shaking so that I couldn't speak very clearly, but he heard me all right, and his lash cracked on the poor mules' backs till I was afraid he'd cut them to shreds. He was certainly getting speed out of 'em. We were going so fast that sometimes the wagon jumped clean off the road, and I could hear the doc give a groan every time we came back to earth. I'd have bet my last shirt we were beating all records for mule teams. But it wasn't any use. Those savages were going two jumps to our one.

By that time they were within shooting distance. I took a try at the nearest one, and got him. When he struck the ground, he rolled over and over.

But that didn't stop the rest of 'em. They didn't even hesitate. I began to reload my gun, and, just as I had feared, it was a tough job—just about all I could do.

"How near are they now, Jeff?" yells Davy just as I finished getting the load in.

I took a peep out. As I did so an arrow came singing at me and struck the tail-board, giving a loud whir-r-r as it stuck there.

"They're almost on top of us, Davy," I called back. "I guess we're done for."

Davy didn't answer. He was too busy keeping the bull-lash going.

The next moment an Indian whose face was

smeared with red and green paint rode right up to the hole in the rear of the wagon-cover and aimed an arrow at me. I dodged. The arrow whistled past me, knocked off Davy's hat, and went on over the heads of the mules. I was glad now that I had been so taken by surprise that there was not time enough to raise my gun, for I doubted whether I should get a chance to reload it again. And even greater need of it was coming, I was sure. Crouching at the hole in the canvas, I was good and ready for that Indian the next time he might try the same trick, when I heard Davy call:

"Hey, Jeff! Quick!"

Scrambling up to the front, I fell over the poor doc on the way, knocking the breath out of him, and got to Davy just as an Indian, his bow pulled back ready to shoot, managed to get his horse alongside of him. I blazed away, right into his face, and we didn't have to worry about him any more.

By the time I got back to the hind end a big bunch of 'em were riding up close. After a moment they spread out into two parties, half of 'em riding up on one side of the wagon and the rest on the other, letting us have a shower of arrows from each direction. Then one shrewd-looking old fellow came tearing up alongside the team, and tried to turn them into the sunflowers,

which grow thick along that trail. Of course, if he once got us into them we were done for, and it looked for a minute as if he was going to succeed. Every second the near mule was being pushed further and further off the track by its mate, which was scared half to death by the Indian.

"Hey, Jeff! Quick!" Davy called out again.

But I was already on the way to help him, and I let the old pest have the load from the pistol.

"That settles him," I shouted as loud as I could, for Davy and the Indians were keeping up such a devilish yelling that it was all I could do to make him hear me. "But now I got to reload."

"Throw out the doc's valise," roared Davy.

At that the doc rose up on his elbows.

"You leave that valise alone," he screamed, "or I'll have the law on the both of ye. It's got my money in it."

"Throw it out, Jeff! Throw it out!" Davy roared again. "If that don't stop 'em we'll throw out the doc."

Davy had never had any hankering for the doc since a time when he paid five dollars for a bottle of his elixir for a stomach ache and was pretty near killed by the stuff.

I made a grab for the valise, just in time to keep the doc from getting his hands on it, and

tossed it overboard. The Indians set up a yell when they got sight of it, and made for it at once, jumping off their horses and ripping at it with their knives. Soon they were brandishing about some of the doc's dearest possessions.

We managed to get a good half mile ahead of them before they started after us again, and it had given me time to reload the gun and the pistol. But pretty soon they were up with us once more, and we got another shower of arrows, though not so many this time, and I knew their supply of them was almost gone.

"Don't fire till you have to, Jeff," Davy called. "And keep your nerve. We'll beat 'em yet."

But the words were no more than out of his mouth when a grinning Injin came riding up to the hind end with his bow drawn, and I had to let him have the gun load to save myself. No sooner had he dropped to the ground than another one took his place. I aimed the pistol at him, but he slid down quick as a cat to the off side of his pony, hanging on by his heel and by one arm, thrown around the animal's neck, so I couldn't get a shot at him. Then I saw his arrow pointing at me from the pony's shoulder, and I tumbled back just in time into the wagon. At that, up he came, and his arrow struck me in the left arm. Just as it hit me I let fly at him.

The ball caught him in his naked breast, and he went pitching off into the sunflowers.

That left me with nothing to shoot, and I tried to reload the gun. But, while it had been a hard enough job before in the swaying wagon, I found it was impossible now, for I couldn't use my left arm. It had been only grazed by the arrow, but was as helpless as if the wound had been a bad one. What little courage I had left began to ooze out of me when I made that discovery, for I couldn't see how we had a chance left. And then, just as I was giving up hope, came Davy's loud cry:

"Hey, Jeff! Quick!"

I scrambled up to the front, and there was an Indian riding alongside, waiting for a good chance to plug Davy with an arrow.

"I've fired 'em both, Davy," I said, "and I can't reload, for my arm's been hit. I guess it's all up with us."

"Throw the gun at him when he comes close," Davy yelled.

So I waited for a chance, and swung it at him, but the Indian saw it coming and dodged.

"Thow the pistol at him!" yells Davy.

Out went the pistol, and luck was with us this time, for it caught the Indian in the face, cutting a gash. He gave a grunt, and went tearing off across the plain.

"Watch out for the hind end, Jeff," cautioned Davy, and back I crawled to the hole in the canvas, though I couldn't see what use I was going to be there, with nothing to shoot and nothing to throw.

"What am I going to do, Davy?" I called. "I can't keep 'em off now."

"Kick at 'em," he answered. "Do anything you can think of. Grab at 'em. Anything's better than givin' up."

Looking around the wagon for something to throw, I caught sight of a bottle of the elixir sticking out of the doc's pocket, for he always carried some of it with him. It might be a life saver now, though I was pretty sure it never had been before. I grabbed it, and just as I pulled it out a painted face showed itself in the hole. The bottle was a heavy one, and I swung it as hard as I could. It went smashing right into that face, and knocked the Indian clean off into the road.

The next minute came Davy's voice again:

"I'm hit, Jeff!"

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that an arrow had come through the canvas, and was sticking into his back. Clambering over to him, I pulled the thing out with a jerk. He began to swear with the pain. It was very seldom that Davy Dawson swore, but I knew from experience that

when he did it meant that his blood was up and that something was pretty sure to happen.

"I'll get one o' them devils yet," he yelled. "See if I don't."

"It's no use, Davy," I said. "We're done for." For already there was another Indian alongside of him waiting his chance to shoot.

But Davy answered not a word. He was crouching forward on his seat, his lash spinning in the air, while the frightened, sweating mules plunged forward in what seemed like a last rally before dropping in their tracks.

In that moment I happened to glance out along the trail that lay ahead of us, and my heart gave a jump. There, flashing in the sun, lay a broad, yellow streak—the Missouri river, not much more than a mile away, with a little settlement of cabins spreading out toward us from its western bank.

"We're almost there, Davy!" I screamed. "We're almost there. But it's too late! He'll get us, sure!"

I saw the Indian grin. He was taking his time about letting his arrow fly, for he knew we were helpless, and he didn't want to take any chance of missing. But that Indian didn't know Davy Dawson.

Davy said never a word. He didn't move a muscle. But the bull-lash was hissing like a

snake. Then suddenly Davy's arm shot out, and the lash darted like a thing alive straight at that Indian. It struck him across the neck, and I saw the blood spurt out in a stream. It must have cut clean through his jugular vein. He dropped to the earth without a sound, and his pony went tearing off across the plain.

Then the lash came down again, cutting into the backs of the mules, and they dashed forward with the last strength that was in them. I climbed out onto the footboard and looked back. The only Indians in sight were heading for the West. I guess they'd seen enough of Davy Dawson's bull-lash.

* * * * * * *

Carefully Quantrell lit his pipe as he concluded his story. His dark eyes were staring broodingly into the starlit, lonely West, as if he saw out there awaiting him and his companions some such dreadful adventure as he and Davy Dawson encountered on that long ago day on the Santa Fe Trail.

CHAPTER III

THE LURKING PERIL

THE Missouri River marked the bounds of civilization. When Coulter's party crossed it the next morning they entered at once into the danger zone, through which the trail led for at least a thousand miles across plains where the fear of attack from Indians was always present. The Valley of the Arkansas was already sprinkled with the bones of hundreds of white victims of the prowling bands of savages. Jeff Quantrell himself could have told many a terrible tale of bloody deeds that had been done there, such tales as had been heard for years in border homes, stirring the women and children with horror.

Stories like these had been told by travelers on many a night in the Eagle Tavern while a solitary candle cast ghostly shadows on the walls, and Tuck Simms, crouching on the hearth-stone before the big log fire in cold weather or sprawling in the open doorway in summer, had not missed a word of them. All the lore of the Santa Fe Trail

he knew, and of that mysterious country to the north of it which only the exiled Mormons, and adventurous trappers, had dared to enter till the migration to California began. The Mormons, driven from Missouri, had never returned—not one of them—but the trappers, hairy, unkempt men in deerskins, were not an unusual sight on the road across the State from Westport Landing to St. Louis. Tuck had met scores of them, and knew the greatest of them all, the famous Jim Bridger, who, on his only journey to St. Louis in many years, had spent a night at the Eagle Tavern. In imagination Tuck had roamed those plains many a time, but never had he actually found himself on them until that day; and he thrilled with the realization of a long-cherished ambition as he drove one of Coulter's teams from the flat-boat ferry and up the steep western bank of the wide river.

Quantrell, mounted on his own horse, a spirited pinto, which had carried him to Santa Fe and back half a dozen times, rode up to the wagon.

"You're in the Devil's own country now, son," he said. "From here all the way to Salt Lake we'll have to keep our eyes peeled for the redskins. West of the lake it's safer, but we'll have plenty to worry us till we get there."

Tuck, as the wagon drew over the top of the bank, studied the far-reaching plains. They

surely looked peaceful enough and inviting—the long, dry grass bending into long waves before the wind and gleaming in the brilliant sunshine; while a thin line of cottonwoods marked the course of a creek, which, many miles to the west, flowed into the sluggish Platte.

"Reckon I ain't afraid," Tuck told Quantrell. "I can use a gun all right." But he did not feel as brave as his words. Indeed a little shiver of fear was running through him as he spoke.

Quantrell rode on, until he was far in advance of the slow-moving wagon train. Tuck shrugged his shoulders, and scowled at the beckoning western horizon, behind which, for all he knew, death might be waiting for him and for them all. "Huh!" he grunted. "Huh!" He was trying to screw up his courage, and was disgusted to find that his nerves were jumping strangely.

The great plains were silent and desolate. There was no sound but the low rumble of the wagon wheels and, now and then, the rasping voice of a driver calling to his team. A wolf skulked along the top of a ridge, its long, lean body sharply outlined against the sky. Sometimes a few antelope appeared on distant slopes. Late in the day a buffalo cow came plunging up from a creek-bed. She stopped to take one quick look at the wagon train, then, with a whisk of her tail, went galloping off.

"Let's see you get her, Jeff," shouted Coulter to Quantrell derisively, for the cow was so far away and moving so fast that it seemed an absolutely impossible shot.

One of the teamsters laughed loudly, but Quantrell seemed to ignore the challenge. His face was as impassive as usual. He was like most of the pioneers, rarely smiling, never laughing, habitually as grave and inscrutable as the Sphinx. Tuck Simms was like him in that respect. If Tuck ever joked it was without even the twinkle of an eye. So it was with this man from the Santa Fe Trail. Neither his eyes nor his face ever betrayed his feelings. The Indians were like that, and the first white men in the West seemed to acquire many of the redmen's characteristics. Or perhaps it was because life in lonely places makes men serious.

Quantrell's eyes, however, were following the buffalo, now scarcely more than a speck in the distance. After a moment he raised his gun quickly. In the same instant he fired. The cow fell headlong, rolled over and lay still.

Coulter's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "I've seen some good shooting in my time," he said at last, "but never anything that could match that."

"Never could have done it with one of the old smooth-bores, Jim," Quantrell admitted mod-

estly. "These new breech-loaders with rifled barrels make a big difference." He rode over to where the buffalo lay, and came back presently with the cow's tongue and some of the choicest cuts—enough meat for everybody at supper that evening.

On a far-distant ridge the next morning a huge herd of buffalo appeared like black ants. It was one of many such herds that they passed during the days before they crossed to the north of the Platte. One afternoon just after that crossing was made Jeff Quantrell pointed to a thin spiral of smoke, barely discernible a long way off across the rolling plains.

"That means Indians," he said; and such an assertion from Quantrell, who had followed the Santa Fe Trail since boyhood, left no room for argument.

Combing his brown beard with his fingers, a habit of his when anything worried him, Jim Coulter stared silently at the smoke.

"Well, we were sure to run into 'em sooner or later," he grumbled, turning to Quantrell. "But that smoke don't necessarily mean we're going to meet 'em, and it don't necessarily mean they're out for trouble."

"Never can tell," Quantrell returned quietly. "I haven't heard that any of the California parties have had any trouble, but that's because

most of 'em have been traveling pretty strong—twenty and thirty wagons to a train, and sometimes ten or fifteen mounted men besides. You've got only eight wagons, Jim, and fifteen men all told, including old Bellamy, who couldn't hit the side of a barn, and Tuck Simms, who's only a boy. You know I warned you back in Missouri that it wasn't any too safe with so few, but you were in such a hurry to get along that you wouldn't wait to link up with another party."

"Wasn't anything to link up with just then except ox teams," retorted Coulter, "and they'd have held us back. We've got only mules and horses, and we could make speed in case of trouble."

"Huh!" grunted Quantrell. "Fine chance we'd have of outrunnin' mounted Indians!" He was about to say more, when a party of long-haired, bearded men came riding toward them from over the top of a ridge. Quantrell recognized them at once as trappers. He counted a dozen of them as they came toward him mounted on shaggy Indian ponies.

"Seen any Indians?" he called as they drew near.

"Yep," came the answer from a weather-beaten old fellow riding a rawboned pinto. "Plenty."

"Any trouble?"

"Well, stranger, they didn't offer no trouble fer us seein' as how we wus pretty good and ready fer 'em."

"Pass any wagon trains lately?"

"Yep; we met up with one a few miles over yonder. But there wusn't much left of it."

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Coulter.

"Injuns," returned the old trapper.

"What happened?" persisted Coulter nervously.

"Stranger," the trapper answered slowly, "I reckon you can jedge fer yerself 'bout as well as I can. Wusn't nothin' there 'ceptin' the wagons and some dead men."

"You think there's trouble ahead for us?" There was just a suspicion of a tremor in Coulter's voice.

"Possible."

The old fellow dug his heels into his pinto, and rode on with his companions.

Coulter turned an anxious face to Quantrell, and again his fingers went to his beard. He was not a timid man as a rule, but he had his wife and his three children in his party and he could not conceal his fears for them.

"What do you think of it, Jeff?" he asked.

"What do you say to waiting here for a party to catch up with us?" Quantrell suggested. "It's

likely we shouldn't have to wait longer than tomorrow."

"Oh, well," Coulter assented with a sigh. "I s'pose we've got to. But it's tough luck—that's all. If we don't reach the Sierras before snow time we'll be stuck at Salt Lake all winter, and there may not be any gold left to find by then."

"Well, you won't find any gold if the Indians get you," Quantrell said sharply. "Since you've agreed to wait for a party to reinforce us we'll get through safe, anyhow—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the Indians get us while we're waiting here. There's just a chance of that, though it'll be dark in a couple of hours, and Indians don't often attack at night."

Quantrell strolled over to the corral formed by the wagons. The mules and horses were already safely gathered inside, among them his own mount, a splendid animal, which had carried him safely through many dangers.

"Thirteen men, and an old codger of seventy, and a boy," he muttered. "Eleven," he added as he recollected that one man had developed eye trouble and was half blind, and that another had a disabled arm. "I wonder if that boy is any account with a gun."

He stopped as he caught sight of old "Uncle" Ezra Bellamy and Tuck Simms close beside him.

Uncle Ezra, who never missed an opportunity of making himself comfortable, was perched on a roll of blankets, while Tuck Simms, sixteen-year-old wagon driver, was cleaning his new breech-loading rifle, which he had bought in Independence just before the party set out on the overland trail.

"Kin ye hit anything with that there gun?" piped Uncle Ezra.

"I reckon I can," Tuck answered.

"Never was much good with shootin' irons myself," Uncle Ezra declared modestly. "Never could hit a thing."

In fact, the old man had never hit any sort of a mark. His life had been one long succession of failures. Many an inspiration he had had for making himself a success, but, though he had never lacked things to aim at, there had always been something the matter with Uncle Ezra's marksmanship. He had always been just on the point of making a fortune, and somehow he always just missed it.

"Back in Missouri," said Tuck, "we hunted wild turkeys. A feller wasn't thought much of if he couldn't hit 'em in the head. Weren't any scatter guns thereabouts, either. Never had any use for a feller who'd use one of them things. No, sir; we used only ball. Been huntin' turkeys since I was knee high to a grasshopper. Got so I could knock their heads off every time. It's easy

if a fellar just sets his mind on it and don't get fidgety with thinkin' he may miss."

Quantrell was giving close attention. Uncle Ezra puffed his pipe in silence for a few moments, and he seemed to be doing some hard thinking over what Tuck had said.

"Too bad my folks didn't bring me up in a wild turkey country," the old man remarked at last. "If I'd got the knack of shootin' off them birds' heads p'raps I'd have got the habit of hittin' what I aimed at after I lit out to make somethin' of myself. I'd have just made up my mind that whatever mark I set for myself was a turkey's head, and old Ezra Bellamy might have been worth a fortune to-day."

"Son," interposed Quantrell, stepping up to Tuck, "you may have use for that new gun of yours before we get to the gold fields. But it's more likely to be Indians you'll be shooting at than turkeys. I'd sort of like to find out what sort of a shot you are."

A stone's throw away was the Platte River, and on the flats along its banks was a thin growth of cottonwood trees. Producing a small, white card, in the center of which was painted a black disk no larger than a silver dollar, Quantrell fastened it to the trunk of one of these trees, and paced off one hundred yards. After completing these preparations, he brought his gun from one

of the wagons, and was met by Abe Judson, who, having seen what was in store, had already armed himself, for he took pride in his ability as a marksman.

"That boy couldn't hit that card if he kept on shootin' till dark," Abe growled. "What's more, I've got a sneakin' suspicion you can't hit the dot first shot yourself, Quantrell."

Quantrell raised his gun to his shoulder and fired. Tuck wondered at the quickness with which the shot followed the lifting of the weapon. It seemed to him that the Santa Fe trailer had not paused an instant to take aim.

"Bet you missed!" Judson cried, as they made their way toward the tree.

"I never miss," Quantrell said quietly.

As they drew near the card they saw that there was a round hole through the center of the black spot.

Abe gave a grunt and glanced curiously at Quantrell. Before meeting him in Independence at the beginning of the Overland journey he had often heard of the Santa Fe trailer, but had never chanced to learn of his skill with a gun.

"My eyesight ain't any too good lately," Abe grumbled, "but even at that I'll eat my shirt if I can't shoot better than that boy."

Tuck had heard from more than one man in Independence of Abe Judson's boast of being a

crack shot, but he did not believe he was in the Santa Fe trailer's class. The boy had a strong dislike for Judson, a surly fellow who had brow-beaten and taunted him from the first day on the trail, and he hoped he would make a bad showing. A moment later his hope was realized, for Judson's bullet missed the bull's-eye by half an inch. Tuck grinned, and the disappointed man turned on him in fury.

"You little whippersnapper!" he cried. "You can't come within a mile of that card. Go on now and try it, if you want to."

Tuck noticed Jim Coulter's pretty, flaxen-haired daughter, Maisie, a girl of about his own age, watching him, and he began to feel nervous. With that girl looking on he was more anxious than ever to do his best, to say nothing of his burning desire to outshoot Judson, but in that crucial moment he felt himself trembling and he knew that if he should fail to overcome his nervousness there would not be a ghost of a chance of his hitting anywhere near the tiny mark.

Old Uncle Ezra came shuffling up beside him.

"Just you make up your mind it's a turkey's head you're shootin' at, Tuck," he advised, "and you'll plug that there bull's-eye sure."

"A turkey's head!" Tuck muttered to himself. "A turkey's head!" The old man was right; Tuck knew that if he could only forget for a mo-

ment the group of people around him and could imagine himself back in Missouri taking a long-distance shot at a turkey's head instead of at a bit of pasteboard he could shoot as well as he had ever done with his old smooth-bore muzzle-loader —and better, for he had a brand-new, up-to-date rifle in his hands now. He closed his eyes and thought of the old hunting days. He recalled a time when he had discovered a turkey so far away that its head was no bigger than a speck. Just a speck. And, without a thought of missing, he had blazed away with his old smooth-bore and hit it.

He opened his eyes. Here it was again—just a speck—a turkey's head in the distance. Anyway, it was easy to imagine it was that, even though it was only the dot on Jeff Quantrell's card. He raised his gun and fired. He felt sure now that his aim was true.

A moment later came a yell of derision from Judson.

"Didn't even nick the tree! Didn't I tell you, Quantrell, that that boy couldn't hit it?"

"Huh!" grunted the bewildered Tuck. He hurried toward the mark, hoping to discover that Judson had been joking. But there was no sign of his own bullet.

For a moment he almost doubted his own ability. Could he have missed the card completely?

To this keen-eyed frontier boy such a thing seemed well nigh impossible. Yet there was no sign of his bullet.

"I reckon I'll fool 'em yet," he muttered, and, going to one of the wagons, he came back with an ax. He pulled the card from the tree and chipped away at the trunk. Putting a finger into the gash he had cut he plucked out a mass of lead—Quantrell's bullet and his own wedged together.

"I reckon I hit that bull's-eye all right," he declared, glaring triumphantly at Judson.

"Just like shootin' turkeys' heads," chuckled Uncle Ezra. "Just you keep them turkeys' heads in mind, boy, and you'll never miss."

"Could you shoot like that, son, if it came to Indians?" put in Quantrell.

"If I could just get to thinkin' about turkeys I could."

"Then suppose you keep thinking about those turkeys," Quantrell told him, "for there are some mighty bad Indians loose in this part of the country just now."

"And so you've been doing a lot of shooting to let 'em know we're here," Coulter interjected peevishly. "It was a fool thing to do in my opinion."

"Hold your horses, Jim," said Quantrell. "They'd find us long before they were within hearing distance by the smoke of our fires. And

even without the help of the fires they'd find us if they came within ten miles. An Indian's got a wonderful instinct for smelling out a white man's camp."

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTACK

Suddenly laying a hand on Coulter's shoulder, Quantrell pointed into the distance.

On the top of a far-away ridge were a few specks, no larger than birds, moving rapidly.

Coulter growled as he clutched at his beard, and the color went out of his face.

"Get back to the wagons, everybody!" he roared.

"Pooh! Pooh!" sputtered Uncle Ezra. "What's the use of always suspectin' 'em? I'll bet they're just comin' to make a sociable call." But he hobbled along after the rest, with Abe Judson going at top speed far in the lead.

"What's to be done now?" demanded Coulter helplessly, as they came to the corral. Fighting Indians was not in his line, and he was getting panicky.

"Pull out everything that will serve as a barricade—boxes, provision bags, saddles, everything, and stow them under the wagons," Quan-

trell ordered. "And make sure all the guns are loaded. When everything's out get the women and children into the wagons, and tell them to keep their heads down."

"You really think they're going to make trouble?" inquired Mrs. Coulter.

"I'm sure enough to be ready for 'em," returned Quantrell.

He surveyed the ring of wagons and the barricades the men were piling up, and seemed satisfied. The heavy wagons, drawn up end to end, formed a strong line of defense, and he knew that if Coulter's men showed any skill at all with the guns they could hold out a long time against ten times their number.

He glanced out across the prairie. The Indians were in plain sight now riding at top speed, and he saw that they were a strong party—fifty at least. Suddenly the silence was broken, by their wild, piercing yells, and Quantrell no longer had the slightest doubt that they meant to attack. The Santa Fe trailer studied them with the eye of an expert. His attention was attracted particularly to one mounted on a white horse who was riding a little in the lead of the others. The half-naked body of this savage was daubed with green and red paint, and he wore a huge war bonnet, whose long, feathered train swung out far behind him in the wind. It was unusual for even

a chief, as this man evidently was, to wear a war bonnet into a fight, for the thing was too cumbersome and was more likely to be used only for ceremonial purposes.

"He must think a whole lot of himself," Quantrell muttered. "I've heard of those bonnets being worn into a row but never saw it done before."

"Hadn't we better begin shooting?" Coulter called anxiously, his harsh voice barely audible amid the deafening yells.

"Don't get nervous, Jim," Quantrell answered. "Nobody begins shooting till I do, and I'll begin plenty soon enough."

A hundred yards away the attacking party, without pausing for an instant in their swift rush, split in two that they might encircle the camp at once. At that moment Quantrell fired, and the bonneted chief, falling from his horse, rolled over and over on the ground until he lay still, with his painted face in the dust. Then a volley roared from the wagons, and half a dozen of the savages fell. A storm of arrows was the answer. Tuck Simms, perched on a wagon pole, saw an arrow sticking into the shoulder of Abe Judson, who was on the driver's seat, but Abe paid no attention to it and kept on firing as fast as he could load.

The Indians, each swinging low behind his

horse's neck and hanging on by only an arm and a heel, swept round and round the corral, bobbing up to shoot and swiftly swinging down again. Horses were falling here and there, but it was seldom one of the riders was hit and then only after his mount had been shot from under him.

"We can be thankful they're only armed with bows," shouted Coulter. "There isn't a gun in the outfit."

"Better for us if they all carried guns," Quantrell returned. "An Indian can send an arrow straighter than he can send a bullet, and he can shoot three times as fast with a bow."

The Santa Fe trailer glanced at Tuck and smiled as he noted how coolly the boy was loading and firing. For Tuck was thinking of turkeys, and making every shot count.

Suddenly a woman's scream rose above the yells of the Indians. It was the voice of Coulter's wife, ringing with fear.

"Jean!" she cried. "My little Jean! She's lost! Oh, what shall I do!"

At that instant Quantrell caught sight of four-year-old Jean Coulter playing in the long grass among the cottonwoods. She had been forgotten in the rush for safety. A moment later an Indian swept toward the child. A bullet from Quantrell's gun dropped him not ten feet away from her. From that time on the Santa Fe trailer

kept his keen eyes on the little girl, determined to shoot any savage that might come near her.

Three of Coulter's men were wounded, and he was giving up hope, when he caught sight of a cloud of dust far off to the east on the trail. In an agony of suspense, he watched it. Nearer and nearer it came, until, in the fierce light of the setting sun, he saw the white gleam of wagon tops bobbing up and down on the rough road.

"We're saved!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Look there, men!"

Twenty wagons they counted, drawn by galloping mules and coming at a furious pace. Sending a final shower of arrows into the camp the Indians began to scatter, and Quantrell breathed a sigh of relief. But he did not take his eyes from little Jean Coulter. An Indian rode swiftly toward the child, his spear raised. Quantrell fired, and the savage fell. Instantly another Indian came charging toward the little girl. The Santa Fe trailer's gun was empty. There was no time to reload.

"Tuck Simms!" he cried. "Get that Indian in the cottonwoods! Think of a turkey, son, and keep cool."

But it was too late. The Indian, swinging low, had already grasped the child and was riding away clutching her in his arms.

Tuck's teeth came together with a snap.

"A turkey!" he muttered. "A turkey!"

It was an almost impossible shot, for the child was clutched close to the Indian's breast. If his aim was not perfect he would miss the Indian and perhaps hit the little girl. A man would have given up in despair, but the boy's cold gray eyes were as hard as steel with grim determination. He was using his imagination. It was not a swiftly disappearing Indian that he saw, but a wild turkey, and his gaze was fastened upon a dot that was the turkey's head.

The boy's gun spoke. Then he dropped it and covered his eyes with his hands. His nerves were going to pieces now that he had done the best he could. But, as he hung dizzily to the wagon pole, he heard a wild cry of relief from Coulter's wife.

"She's saved! She's saved!"

Tuck opened his eyes. At the base of a scrawny cottonwood the Indian lay in a motionless heap, and little Jean, with outstretched, chubby arms, was running toward the wagons. In the distance the last of the Indians were fast disappearing, while the white-topped caravan was drawing closer.

"Wild turkeys' heads boy!" chuckled old Uncle Ezra Bellamy. "I told you! That's what did it. Wild turkeys' heads!"

CHAPTER V

THE BRANDED HAND

"We ought to be pretty safe from the redskins since we hooked up with this other party back at the Platte," Jim Coulter observed, "but these strangers have certainly got some hard-looking characters among 'em. This gold rush is bringing all the scum of the country. I'll bet all the jail-birds that are loose are headin' for California right now."

Coulter would have come near winning his bet. Every desperado along the Missouri river—and the Missouri's shores were prolific of that kind of men—was mingling with thieves, vagabonds and unhung rascals of all types from all sections of the country, who were moving westward to the new gold fields that summer of 1849. Many of these unsavory characters were going by way of the Isthmus, but that route was expensive and offered little opportunity for a man to work his way, so the great majority of them were traveling with the overland caravans. None of them had

succeeded in joining Coulter's party, so far as he knew, but the outfit that had joined forces with him on the banks of the Platte was cursed with a large number of these undesirables. Baxter, who was the leader of this party, and the other wagon owners in his train, although almost outnumbered by the vicious element, had managed, not without a good deal of anxiety, to keep the upper hand, and they were glad to be reinforced by Coulter and his followers, who put the lawless contingent into a decided minority.

Baxter had seventy men with him, besides the wives and children of a few of the wagon owners. Almost a third of the men were outriders, mounted on horses of their own. Among these mounted men were to be found the worst characters of all, the offscouring of the frontiers of civilization. One of this shady lot was a short, wiry, gray-haired man who was known as "Squinty" Gower, the nickname being due to the fact that his expression was dominated by the decided squint of his little, unsteady eyes—green eyes they were, as green as a cat's, and as hard and as treacherous, though it was rarely anybody got much of a look at them, so shifty were they and so often almost hidden by the squinting lids.

Nobody seemed to know anything about Gower. He seldom spoke, and never about himself. But this fact, where there was many a man who had a

black past to conceal, was not likely to arouse comment. The frontier bounded by the Missouri was full of men who had good reason to be reticent concerning themselves. Gower, like them, might have a past that was better unmentioned, or he might be uncommunicative merely because it was his nature to be so. But his appearance was against him. The restless eyes, which never could meet another's gaze, the thin-lipped, cruel mouth, the little, round, lobeless ears, the narrow forehead all spoke of evil, no matter how still his tongue might be.

Gower had one peculiarity that only a close observer would have discovered. For a sixteen-year-old boy Tuck Simms had sharp, shrewd eyes in studying the ways of men, and the fact that there was one small detail about Gower that was out of the ordinary did not escape his notice. It surely would have escaped the notice of nine men out of ten, and probably would have been a long time in catching the attention of the remaining tenth, for it was the easiest singularity imaginable to overlook. A man might eat with Gower, and sleep with Gower, and be side by side with Gower for weeks at a stretch without becoming aware of what Tuck Simms had observed. It was a trifling thing, which might have no significance, but the more Tuck thought of it the more it stirred his curiosity.

To make this discovery had taken considerable time and a good deal of study on Tuck's part. Indeed, it would have been impossible for anybody to have made it at once. Tuck reached it by slow stages. Gower had a habit of sitting with his hands clasped at the back of his head while he puffed his pipe. In an idle moment he was raising his hands to this favorite position, when he caught sight of Tuck looking at him. Evidently Gower had believed he was alone, for he gave a little start, and there was an angry flash from the squinting eyes. It was something else, however, that Tuck noticed most, the sudden closing of Gower's upraised right hand. It seemed to Tuck a little unusual for a man to close his hand so very quickly on discovering that he was observed. Of course, anybody might shut his hand with a snap without meaning anything by it, but there was an indefinable something about the way Gower did it which, coupled with his startled, menacing expression, stirred Tuck's interest for the moment.

Though the incident was not worth thinking about very long, it served to bring Tuck's attention to Gower's right hand whenever he saw the man, and gradually the boy realized that Gower was careful always to keep that hand closed whenever anybody was looking at him. It took him several days to be convinced of that fact, because

any man might go for an hour at a time without opening his hand. But every man does open his hand, enough to expose the palm of it, sometimes —several times an hour, perhaps. To notice that one never did so would take not only an unusually observant pair of eyes, but eyes that had been put on the watch by such an incident as had set Tuck on the trail of Gower's peculiarity.

One night when a chill wind was sweeping down from the snow-covered tops of the Rocky Mountains Gower kindled a little fire of buffalo chips for himself, and sat hovering over it alone. From a few yards away in the dark Tuck caught sight of him and noticed that Gower's hands were spread out over the flames. His hands were spread out because he thought nobody was near. Tuck decided that here was a possible opportunity of discovering why Gower when not alone kept his right hand closed. Dropping down on his hands and knees, he wormed his way silently over the short, dry buffalo grass toward the fire. The night was unusually dark, and he knew that if he could succeed in making no noise the chances were a hundred to one that Gower would not see him.

He crawled as close to the fire as he dared; then lay motionless, watching. Gower's hands were still spread out, but they were held horizontally over the flames. Tuck waited for them to be

tilted upward. After a moment Gower lifted them. Both palms were wide open toward Tuck. The boy stared at the man's right hand in wonder. Across the palm, for its entire width, was branded the letter T, glowing vivid white in the light of the fire.

For a few moments Tuck lay with his eyes fixed in fascination on that branded hand. T stood for thief. He did not have to think twice to realize that. But what fiendish sort of thievery could Gower have committed that he had been cursed with this mark of shame that could never be erased? Perhaps, he thought, Gower had been convicted in some country where the laws designated that form of punishment. But Tuck had never heard of such a country, though he had read enough to know that it was a common penalty in the Middle Ages. He gave up trying to solve the problem. Anyway, Gower was marked as a thief; there was no doubt of that.

Being a discreet and close-mouthed youth, Tuck might have kept his discovery to himself if a robbery had not occurred soon afterward. The victim was "Uncle" Ezra Bellamy. Uncle Ezra reported that while he was asleep under one of the wagons somebody had stolen his gold watch and his money belt, which contained three hundred dollars, almost all the money the old man possessed in the world. Tuck was fond of Uncle Ezra, and he

made up his mind that he would try to recover the stolen property. He had no idea how he was going to do it, but he kept brooding over the matter, hoping that sooner or later he would be struck by an inspiration.

Soon he learned that Quantrell, Coulter and Baxter had been in consultation over the affair and that they were just as determined as he was to find the guilty man. Going in search of Quantrell, he found him at last in a lonely spot sprawled on the ground beside his horse. When anything worried Quantrell he always preferred his horse's companionship to that of human beings, and it was plain from the expression of his face that something worried him now.

"What do you want?" he demanded, glancing sullenly at the boy.

"Don't want nothing," replied Tuck.

"Then what brings you here?" Quantrell was plainly annoyed at being disturbed.

"Thought maybe you wanted something," said Tuck. "Been fretting a lot about that robbery, haven't you?"

Quantrell stared at the boy, but gave no answer. He seemed to be wondering whether it would be worth while to talk with him of the matter.

"You're right, son," he said after a long silence. "That robbery has got on my nerves. Now that such a thing has happened once it will hap-

pen again, and again, and we'll have to be on our guard all the way to California. Unless we get the thief."

"I reckon," said Tuck, "that if somebody took a look inside of Gower's right hand he might get an idea that would help."

Quantrell sprang to his feet and stood rigid, his eyes studying the boy's face keenly.

"What have you seen in Gower's right hand?" he demanded sharply.

"Course I'm not accusing Gower," said Tuck, "but, if it'll be of any use to you, there's the first letter of 'thief' branded inside that hand."

Quantrell's eyes fairly blazed.

"Gower!" he exclaimed. 'Gower! After all these years! Queer I never recognized him with that squint to give me the clew."

Without another word, he mounted his horse, and rode slowly away, apparently absorbed in thought.

CHAPTER VI

DON GONZALO'S CROSS

TUCK did not see Quantrell again until evening, when many of the men, Quantrell, Coulter and Baxter among them, were gathered around the camp fire.

The caravaners had halted at the only point on the Forty-niners' trail where the Rockies are in view in all their grandeur. The trail goes over the Continental Divide with scarcely another glimpse of those mountains, for Sherman Pass, though it is eight thousand feet high, is only a plateau, from which the peaks are seldom seen. Not far away from the camp fire the billowy, white tops of the wagons showed dimly in the dark. A thin, struggling line of cottonwoods, barely discernible, marked the course of a creek-bed, dry as a bone in summer, but filled with a roaring torrent after Spring rains or thaws. The absolutely cloudless sky was thickly sprinkled with brilliant stars clear down to the horizon. For forty or fifty miles the plains were in view—

not flat, as the caravaners had seen them in Nebraska, but rising into high, long ridges and falling into deep, wide hollows. Beyond them stood the Rocky Mountains' main range, an immense blue wall towering out of the shades of night with jagged summits flecked with snow, snow that chilled the dry air of the summer night, which was perfumed with the flowers and grasses of the plains.

It was story-telling time in camp, and somebody called out, "Quantrell, you've had a lot more adventures than most of us. Let's hear about one of 'em."

"I'm not feeling in that kind of a mood tonight," came the answer.

But the next moment Quantrell changed his mind as he caught sight of Gower crouching close to the fire.

"There was something that happened once down on the Santa Fe Trail that I might tell you about," he said. His gaze was fixed intently on Gower, who was squinting at the flames. A dead silence fell as the circle of men waited for him to continue. The smoke of many pipes drifted up into the dark.

"Of all the steamboat towns Westport was the worst I ever saw," Quantrell went on. "It was full of as bad a lot of ruffians as ever escaped the gallows. There was a notorious gang of land

pirates there who had been making raids on rich wagon trains on the Santa Fe Trail for years, and they had cleaned up a lot of money. This gang pricked up their ears and began to show a lot of interest when Don Gonzalo Hernandez, a rich Mexican, arrived from Santa Fe, where he had a big general mercantile business. In his train were a dozen wagons, his private coach, in which he traveled like a lord, and several servants, besides the teamsters. Westport's thieves saw rich pickings in sight, and put their heads together to scheme out a way to get them. I'm going to tell you how they did it; and I'm going to tell you about a man who was one of that gang—a man with squinty eyes."

At that Gower raised his head, and from the corners of his shifty eyes shot at Quantrell a swift, savage glance.

"A man with squinty eyes," repeated Quantrell, looking hard at Gower, who had resumed his study of the flames. "But I haven't got to him yet. We'll have to trail along with Don Gonzalo a little while before getting to the other fellow and his gang.

"The Don and his train drifted through Westport, and went on to St. Louis, where he went once a year to buy goods. He was loaded down with silver money, and the land pirates knew he would have plenty of it left.

"After about a couple of weeks back he came to Westport with his party on his way to Santa Fe. I was a boy at the time, not quite full grown, and had been working with an overland outfit as a driver. The day the Don blew into town he was a driver short, and I was out of a job. I went to him, and told him I was up against it—broke. He was a dapper little man with a lot of jewels on his fingers, and dangling from a chain, which he wore around his neck, was a gold cross. While he talked with me his fingers kept playing with this cross, and now and then his eyes would rest on it as if it was the most cherished thing he owned. And I guess it was. Though any one of the diamonds on his fingers must have been worth twenty times as much, I came to find out that he almost worshipped that cross.

"That Don was the kindest, biggest-hearted man I ever knew. From the very first he treated me as if I were his own son. He gave me the job as a driver at bigger wages than I'd ever dreamed of getting, advanced me money enough to buy everything I needed, and offered to take me into his home in Santa Fe and to give me a chance to work my way up in his business. It certainly looked as if a rosy future was ahead of me, all right.

"It seemed to me the Don was taking big chances in making such a display of his wealth in

a place like Westport, and I told him so. But he didn't seem to be worried. He only laughed at me; said he'd been through that town a dozen times with many thousands of dollars in his money bags, and that it would be a clever thief that could rob him. But Don Gonzalo didn't know those land pirates. They were as bad a crew as the frontier ever produced, and they wouldn't stop at murder when a chance came of making a big haul.

"They didn't dare carry out their plan in the State of Missouri, for they knew there were plenty of citizens along its border who would be ready to punish them unmercifully. Their only chance was to carry out their plot in the Indian country of Kansas, where there was practically no law. So they went out as far as Cow Creek at the point where it runs into the Arkansas, and waited, for they knew that this was a dangerous point for the passage of freight caravans and coaches, and that the Don and his party would have the usual trouble and delay in getting across.

"When we got to the creek and had made camp for the night there came a volley of shots from the land pirates' ambush, and five of our men were hit. The rest of us—the few that were armed—began to return the fire. But we hadn't a chance. In the first place the gang was so well concealed in the brush that we couldn't see 'em,

and in the second place we were terribly outnumbered, as we could tell from the number of shots they were sending into us.

"Well, those bloody rascals almost wiped us out. I got a bullet in the shoulder, and counted myself lucky when I saw there wasn't one of us who had escaped their shots except Don Gonzalo himself. They had a reason for letting the Don live—for a while, at least—for they wanted to make him tell 'em where his money was.

"As soon as nobody was left to return their fire they came out from the brush, and began to go through the wagons. But their leader made a bee line for the Don's coach, his gun under his arm and murder in his eyes. Squinty eyes they were, that never looked a man straight in the face; the shiftiest eyes I ever saw—until a little while ago."

Again Quantrell looked at Gower, whose head was bowed low and who, in the glow of the fire, seemed to shrink under his steady gaze.

"The Don was sitting as still as a statue in his silken cushions, his fingers playing with the golden cross.

" 'Get out of that,' Squint-eyes ordered.

"The Don got out, and Squint-eyes, looking him over greedily, demanded his jewelled rings. Don Gonzalo, knowing that his life would be worth

nothing if he should refuse, took the rings off and surrendered them—a fortune for Squint-eyes right there.

"But Squint-eyes wasn't satisfied. He noticed the Don's fingers, still playing with the cross, and demanded that he hand it over with the rings. At that Don Gonzalo's eyes flashed fire.

" 'Never!' he cried. 'This cross belonged to my father. It is a holy relic, passed down through generations. All through his life it protected him in many a danger. I promised him as he lay dying that I should never part with it. He told me that it would bring me fortune, and from the day he gave it to me I have done nothing but prosper. To get it you will have to take my life. But I warn you that it will be no lucky charm for you; it will be a curse upon you. You will live to regret the day that you ever touched it, for this sacred thing was never meant to bring good fortune to a thief.'

"But Squint-eyes wasn't feeling superstitious just then, and he wasn't the kind that had any reverence for sacred things, or for anything else. He made a grab for the cross, and tore it from its chain.

"Don Gonzalo, with a cry, sprang at him like a wildcat. The two struggled together, backward and forward, until they came to the fire, which some of our teamsters had started. At that mo-

ment the Don managed to wrench the cross away from Squint-eyes, and instantly he tossed it into the center of the fire. For several minutes they kept up their struggle, until Squint-eyes broke away, and made a rush to save the cross. He succeeded in kicking it out of the coals, but it was red hot and he didn't dare touch it.

"The Don stooped, and picked it up. It must have burned through his flesh to the bone, but he didn't seem to feel the pain. As he held it Squint-eyes grabbed him again.

" 'Take it if you must!' cried the Don, and he pressed the glowing cross into Squint-eyes' open hand.

"Squint-eyes yelled like an Indian. The cross was sizzling in his palm, burning clear through the flesh. And Don Gonzalo held it there, heedless of what he must be suffering himself.

" 'Take it!' he cried, 'Let it be a curse on you as long as you live!'

"At last Squint-eyes tore himself away, weak and half fainting from the pain. He raised his gun, and fired. Don Gonzalo—may his soul rest in peace, for a better man never lived—fell dead before the fire.

"If I hadn't been so weak and dizzy myself from my wound I am sure I should have made a rush at Squint-eyes, even though he did have a gun and mine had been taken from me. He

wouldn't have had time to reload, though he might have clubbed me with it, and I'd have been glad of the chance of grappling with him. I felt like getting my hands on his throat and choking the wicked life out of him, and I was strong enough to have done it, even though I was only a boy. But I had lost a lot of blood and was pretty helpless. I grew so faint that I couldn't keep on my feet, and I slumped down beside a wagon wheel and lay there, watching Squint-eyes. He came up close to where I lay, but didn't take the least notice of me. In fact, I don't believe he even saw me, for he was too much occupied in nursing his burned hand.

"Now and then he would give a groan as he nursed the hand by holding it under his armpit.

"Once he held the hand up before his face to study it, and it was then that I saw what had happened to him. The cross had been held in his hand in such a way that the upper point of it was outside his palm and hadn't touched him. The part that had touched him had burned a perfect letter T clear through the flesh—a brand that would never come out. And I realized that Don Gonzalo's curse had come true."

Quantrell paused for a moment, staring steadily at Gower, who for an instant turned a frightened face toward him.

"I'm not going to bother much to explain how

a squad of troopers from Fort Dodge happened along in time to save me and the few that still lived from being murdered and how Squint-eyes and his gang had to get away in a hurry, leaving most of their loot behind. In fact, I've only got one more thing to tell that would be of much interest to you men—and that is that if anybody cares to look inside 'Squinty' Gower's right hand he'll find the brand of Don Gonzalo's cross."

Gower staggered to his feet.

"It's a lie!" he cried, but he held his right hand tightly closed.

Two men seized him, while a third pried the hand wide open, and held it high in the light of the fire for all to see. The letter T—the curse wrought by Don Gonzalo—gleamed white as snow in the glow of the flames.

"He's the man that robbed me!" screamed Uncle Ezra Bellamy. "Let me get at him! I'll bet he's got my watch and money belt on him right now."

The next moment proved that Uncle Ezra was right, for the money belt, with the gold still inside it, and the watch were produced by eager, searching hands as they went through Squint-eyes' clothes.

"We ought to string this man up," Jim Coulter shouted. "There's no law out here, and we can do as we please with him. If we hang him to

the nearest cottonwood it'll be a good lesson to any other thief we may have among us."

"No," Quantrell intervened sharply. "We've got no right to hang a man for stealing. But he can't travel with us any more. He's got to shift for himself. We'll turn him loose on the plains with a week's rations. When that's gone he can scare up food for himself with his gun."

A slow, meaning smile spread over Quantrell's face. "That is, he can if he's alive by that time," he added.

Not for a moment did Quantrell intend that Squint-eyes should be alive by that time. Only three days had passed since a drunken teamster in the party had shot an Indian for stealing tobacco, and Quantrell well knew that every savage within two hundred miles of them was boiling to get even. The Indians were too weak to attack such a big caravan. But Squint-eyes, all alone on the plains—well, that would be different.

From the top of the high ridge that rose just to the west of the creek-bed a group of men and a boy stood gazing off across a vast stretch of rolling country. Three miles away to the East a solitary horseman, a mere speck on the brown plains, was slowly being swallowed up in the distance. Suddenly from close beside him a small party of Indians came into view, riding at a gallop. They were in pursuit of "Squinty" Gower.

A fierce light played in Quantrell's eyes. He was thinking of what had happened to his friend, Don Gonzalo Hernandez.

"It would have been kinder to 'Squinty' if we had strung him up," said Jim Coulter.

The Indians were closing in on Gower, and Tuck Simms gave a shudder as he thought of the tortures that were in store for the man.

"He just opened his hand," Tuck muttered, "just opened his hand a second while I was watching him. Such a little thing to do, yet it's going to be the death of him. Gee! Just because he opened his hand!"

CHAPTER VII

DOWN THE RIVER OF MYSTERY

A MONTH later, working its way slowly westward across sagebrush and alkali came a long line of canvas-topped emigrant wagons. In front of the crawling caravan, in the rear, and scattered alongside rode parties of mounted men, their felt hats tilted low to screen their eyes from the brilliant invigorating sunshine that filters through the dry, clear, high air of the Wyoming desert.

Bearded men they were, most of them, who scorned anything more picturesque in the way of costume than red-flannel shirts combined with the conventional vests and flapping trousers of civilization, though now and then came one in the buckskins and moccasins of the trapper or of the old-timer on the prairie trails. Silent men they were, most of them, riding mile after mile with scarce a word; but now and then from the wagons came a chatter of shrill voices, a laugh, a song, the voices of children, or of young women whose

faces were almost hidden in deep sunbonnets. The spirit of youth refused to be wholly subdued by the dreariness, the silence, the vastness of those empty desert places which had stilled the tongues of the men.

Sometimes there was the raucous shout of a mule driver, or the loud crack of a bull-whacker's whip as it spun far out over a four-yoke team. It was not an easy time for the drivers, for, worn out by a journey of a thousand miles and more, both mules and oxen were straining hard to pull the heavy, lumbering wagons over the rough trail.

Sitting beside one of these drivers a girl sang gaily,

> "Oh, California!
> That's the land for me.
> I'm bound for San Francisco,
> With my wash-bowl on my knee."

But, in spite of her cheerful voice and laughing face, the caravan's chances of getting to California that year were beginning to look very poor. The teams were almost exhausted. Many horses, mules and oxen had fallen sick; some had been left to die beside the trail. This meant more work for those that remained in harness. More work increased the number that succumbed to exhaustion or sickness, and Coulter and Baxter,

the leaders of the party, figured that if the ratio of losses continued there wouldn't be an animal left by the time that had been set for reaching the new gold fields. And this was not the only source of worry. The wagons were in bad shape. Broken axles and worn-out tires occasioned many delays, which were becoming more and more frequent. The party was way behind its scheduled time, and there was a constantly growing danger that it would not be able to make the Sierras before the first snows. With heavy snow in the passes it would be impossible to get through the range, and the alternative would be to spend the winter with the Mormon colony at Salt Lake, an expensive proposition which would bring Coulter and Baxter close to ruin, to say nothing of the loss of the opportunities that would fall to the first arrivals in the gold country.

It was because of this state of affairs that the caravan, in a desperate effort to make up lost time, was now making a short cut across the desert on the same line that was to be followed almost a quarter of a century later by the builders of the Union Pacific Railroad, instead of circling to the north and taking the safer route along the Sweetwater and down the Big Sandy.

Jim Coulter could not conceal his worries. His face was haggard, his eyes heavy with trouble. His teams were thirsty. They had gone twenty

miles without seeing the slightest sign of water. His eyes searched the country that lay before him, and his heart sank. He could see nothing but an endless stretch of sagebrush and alkali, barren buttes, low, parched, yellow hills, and, to the south, peeping above the clear, remote horizon, the snow-crowned tips of unknown mountains.

Jeff Quantrell rode up beside Coulter's wagon.

"Jim," he called, "whatever this disease is that's been running through our animals, I believe it's got my horse. He's all in."

"It looks as if the game was pretty near up, Jeff," returned Coulter listlessly. "Looks to me as if we'd have to winter at Salt Lake, and I can't figure how I'm going to pay for food and lodging for my men and teams till spring. And the Mormons ain't any too friendly—at least they won't be if they find out we're from Missouri. They have a mighty strong dislike for Missourians, you know, an' can't say as I blame 'em none."

While Coulter was speaking a small party of men riding out of the west caught Quantrell's attention.

"Speaking of Mormons, Jim," he said, "I believe some of 'em are out yonder right now."

The two men waited for the strangers to draw near. It was an odd-looking party, Mormons beyond a doubt—six of them, mounted on small,

Spanish mules. They were dressed, like trappers, in buckskins and mocassins, the same costume that Quantrell himself wore and which he had worn for many years on the Sante Fe Trail. Rough-looking fellows they were, with long beards, long, matted hair and old slouch hats. At their heels jingled spurs whose rowels were fully four inches long. Each carried a gun, a pistol and huge knife. An extra pack mule was with them, but their baggage and provisions were very light.

To his great relief Coulter learned from them that a little water was to be found a few miles to the west, and that the Green River was only another day's march ahead.

"The Green River?" said Quantrell to one of the strangers inquiringly. "We're past the Continental Divide, so it must flow into the Pacific, don't it?"

The Mormon nodded.

"Navigable?" Quantrell pursued.

"Well, I reckon it might be," the Mormon drawled. "I've heard tell of some that tried it, but I dunno how they made out."

A look of abstraction came into Quantrell's dark eyes, and he sat silent in his saddle, his head bent forward in thought. After the Mormons had passed on he turned again to Coulter.

"I wonder if this Green River wouldn't carry

some of us through to California," he said. "If my horse gives out I have half a mind to try it."

"Better not, Jeff," Coulter cautioned. "It runs through a country nobody knows anything about. You'd be taking long chances."

"I've never balked at long chances," said Quantrell. "Been taking 'em all my life. If anything happens to me there'll be nobody left to worry, so I can afford to play with danger. You don't need me now that you've hooked up with Baxter's party, which makes you strong enough to keep Indians off, and if you've got to winter at Salt Lake you'll be very glad to get rid of your men."

When the caravan made camp that night the possibilities presented by the river—the river whose course no white man knew and which flowed into a vast, trackless region of mystery—had taken firm hold of Quantrell's mind. His horse had fallen under him at the end of the day's march, and he had sent a bullet between the animal's eyes to put him out of misery. That misfortune had almost decided him in favor of trying the unknown water route, whose uncertainties and dangers fascinated him and fired his imagination. Pondering the problem of whom he should select to go with him on the adventure into the great unknown, he studied the men who lay sprawled in groups on the dry ground in the

bright moonlight. He believed that one of the party should be Mark Brasher, who had had years of experience as a boatman on the Mississippi. Then his mind turned to Tuck Simms. He had formed an affection for that boy and did not like the idea of parting company with him. Tuck was shrewd and strong for his age, and better than most men with a gun. For a time he hesitated over taking a mere boy into danger, but he reflected that he himself had been even younger than Tuck when he first made the acquaintance of the Santa Fe Trail, which in those days was filled with as many perils as could be found anywhere.

"Pooh!" he sneered. "A boy's got to take his chances with men out in this country if he's ever going to amount to anything."

He sought out Tuck, and told him of his plan. The boy fairly jumped at it. But his enthusiasm cooled when he learned that Quantrell was thinking of taking Brasher along.

"What's the matter with Brasher?" Quantrell demanded.

"He's got a yellow streak," declared Tuck. "You watch him, and you'll find out."

Quantrell smiled. He knew himself that Brasher had a yellow streak, but he had scarcely thought that Tuck could read characters so well.

"I guess you're right about that, son," he ad-

mitted, "but he's a boatman, and we need him."

"He'll leave us in the lurch some day," Tuck persisted. "He's that kind."

Indeed only a day or two had passed since Brasher, brooding over the caravan's dwindling chances of getting to the gold fields that year, had disclosed some of his philosophy of life to Tuck.

"I won't stick to Baxter, no matter how much he needs me," Brasher had said, "if I can reach the gold country quicker with another party. Look out for your own skin every time, youngster, and let other folks shift for 'emselves. It don't do a man any good to be always looking out for other folks. 'Me first'—that's my motto."

Tuck realized that Baxter, facing the probability of wintering at Salt Lake, would be glad to get rid of Brasher now, but that fact didn't excuse Brasher's willingness to be disloyal to his boss. It was not only by his words that Tuck judged the man; it was also by his appearance. Tuck had studied many types of men since leaving Missouri, and Brasher's face, sharp featured, with little, twinkling, suspicious eyes, had seemed to him to be a particularly bad one.

Toward the end of the following day the river came into sight—a huge, green curling snake shimmering in the sunlight. Quantrell had already formed his party, though he had not been

able to choose as he had wished, for there were very few men that cared to run the risks of such a venture. Brasher was willing to go, and so was Asa Safford, a weak-faced, timid-looking man over whom the smooth-tongued, self-confident Brasher seemed to exercise a controlling influence. Then there was Uncle Ezra Bellamy, eager for the adventure but too old for such a desperate undertaking, and Job Danby, a quick-witted boy of Tuck's age who hailed from New York City. Tuck had formed a firm friendship with Job, and had succeeded, after some effort, in persuading Quantrell to take him. It was not the sort of party Quantrell had counted on, but it was the best he could get together under the circumstances.

Brasher knew how to build a boat, and somewhere along the river's course they would surely find timber; but, on arriving at the stream, this problem was unexpectedly solved for them by the discovery of an old ferryboat, half mired in sand. On digging it out from its bed in the river bank, they found it to be in perfect condition. Coulter and Baxter agreed to stock the boat with provisions, and by morning the little party of six was ready to set out on the uncertain journey.

There were tears in Jim Coulter's eyes as he said goodbye. It was a foolhardy venture, he believed, and he had a feeling that none of the

adventurers would ever be heard from, in spite of his confidence in Quantrell.

But Quantrell and his companions had no misgivings. If their provisions should run low there would surely be plenty of game, and each member of the party had a gun. At any rate, they were making a start under favorable auspices. The boat, twelve feet long and six feet wide, gave them plenty of room; there were two strong oars, which they had dug out of the sand beside the craft; each man had provided himself with a stout pole to guide them through rocks; there was a substantial supply of flour and bacon, ropes for head and stern lines, two axes, in fact, everything for which there would be likely to be serious need.

All through the first day the current swept them on into the south without any effort on their part. When night fell they pulled their boat on shore, and slept on the dry, sandy bank, Quantrell and old Bellamy taking turns on guard.

Once Tuck Simms awoke. He knew from the position of the moon, hanging like a round, white lantern in a cloudless sky, that it was long past midnight. In grim silence a few yards away sat Quantrell, his gun across his knees. Tuck reached out with his foot, and nudged Job Danby. The boy opened his eyes with a start, then dozed off, muttering something about the newsboys in the

streets of New York. Far off in the south, to which the river seemed to be flowing, rose a mountain range, faint blue above the horizon. The river murmured softly; in the dry buffalo grass millions of insects chirped their continuous song to the night. Romance took hold of Tuck and thrilled him. He was a pathfinder, about to enter an unexplored domain; and who could tell where the river of mystery might carry him? But he knew that every member of the little party would be put to crucial tests before the end of their adventures, that in the unknown country that lay before them every man's true character would be exposed, stripped of all sham and subterfuges, sooner or later. He glanced at the sleeping form of Brasher, wondering how soon the boatman's yellow streak would show itself.

"'Me first'—that's my motto." He was sure Brasher would prove true to his words before long.

It was about noon of the second day that, on turning a bend in the stream, they came suddenly within a stone's throw of a small party of half-naked Indians. Some of the savages ran down to the river bank, and beckoned to them to come ashore. Quantrell laughed at them, shaking his head, and the boat swept slowly on. An arrow came whirring toward them, and splashed into the water. Brasher sprang for his gun, and,

pointing it at the group of painted warriors on the bank, fired.

"You blamed fool!" Quantrell shouted, his eyes flashing with anger. "Now we're in for trouble sure. If you hadn't fired that shot they wouldn't have bothered us much, but now——"

A shower of arrows interrupted him. Most of them fell into the river, but one struck the side of the boat and stuck there, buzzing like a bee from the force of its suddenly arrested momentum. Brasher cowered down under one of the seats, his lips quivering, his eyes full of terror. Tuck, with a contemptuous glance at him, muttered to himself, "There's the yellow streak showing again."

" 'Pears to me, it's about time we wuz teaching them rascals a lesson," said Uncle Ezra, his gun ready for action.

"No," Quantrell cried sharply. "What's the use? They're not following us, but if we kill one of 'em they'll try for all they're worth to get even. We'll be out of range in a moment."

A few more arrows whistled through the air, either falling short of the boat or passing harmlessly over it, but the Indians made no attempt to follow along the shore. Soon the river took a sudden turn, and the red warriors were lost to sight. It was not until then that the frightened Brasher crept up from the bottom of the boat.

"'Me first—that's my motto,'" murmured Tuck with a sneer. "He's careful of his own skin all right."

For a long time after that incident they journeyed on in peace and comfort, the current saving them from hard work at the oars, a very slight amount of effort being necessary to keep the boat in the middle of the stream. One day Tuck shot an antelope, and they lived high on venison steak. It was surely an easy, luxurious life as compared with their experience in the wagon train.

CHAPTER VIII

THE YELLOW STREAK

"Why in thunder didn't anybody ever think of getting to Californy this way before?" remarked Uncle Ezra one morning as he puffed his after-breakfast pipe. "This is what I call real peace and comfort. All we got to do is sit here and rest till we get to the Pacific, and then we'll stroll along the beach till we get to the point for striking up into the gold country."

Quantrell laughed. "Sounds easy, Uncle," he returned. "But don't you be too sure. We're going to get into all kinds of trouble before long."

And, even as he was speaking, a distant sound of roaring and hissing came to their ears.

"What's that?" cried Brasher.

"It's the river," Quantrell answered. "There's a swift current ahead, and rocks, too, like as not. Get your poles ready." Already the boat was shooting ahead at a much faster pace and

the pressure of the wild water made its boards creak and groan.

"Jee-rusalem!" cried Uncle Ezra. "What are we comin' to?" He had caught sight of great boulders in the path of the stream, and of leaping spray.

"Better make for the shore," urged Brasher. "We can't get through there."

"We're going to try to get through," returned Quantrell firmly. "We'll take our chances. If you want to get to shore you'll have to swim."

Suddenly the boat gave a lurch, and plunged forward faster than ever. The roaring and hissing of the water drowned their voices, and spray dashed against their faces. Quantrell sprang to the bow of the boat, pole in hand, just in time to avert crashing into a huge mass of rock. The boat was plunging and rolling dangerously, and wave-splashed boulders stood up above the water in all directions.

"We can't get through!" wailed Brasher. "We'll be smashed to pieces in another minute."

Every one in the party was at work, trying desperately to keep the boat from the thickly-strewn rocks. There was just a chance—a bare chance—of getting through, but the odds were all against them.

"Look!" cried Bellamy. "Look there!"

His shaking voice was scarcely heard above

the noise of the mad waters, but at almost the same instant everybody saw what had startled him. Straight ahead of them rose the immense, perpendicular wall of a mountain, which seemed to stretch completely across the narrow valley through which the river ran. Apparently the stream was rushing down under this towering cliff into the depths of the earth.

White with fear, Brasher gave a wild cry of despair. The whimpering Safford would have leaped overboard if Job Danby had not caught him by the legs in the nick of time.

"We'll be sucked down under the mountain!" cried Brasher.

He drove his pole into a jutting ledge in an effort to turn the boat against a giant boulder which stood menacingly near, evidently preferring to be wrecked where he was than to take chances on a subterranean voyage. The boat grazed the boulder's side, careened till the foaming water poured inside, righted itself just as it seemed about to founder, and swept swiftly on through the flying spray. The cliff was scarcely more than a stone's throw ahead. The mountain's dark shadow fell over them. They gave themselves up as lost.

Quantrell, who had been close to death many a time in his wild career, sat staring at the mountain with placid indifference. Tuck and Job,

with tightened lips and clenched fists, were trying desperately to prove their courage. Uncle Ezra was as cool as a cucumber. It didn't seem to matter a bit to him whether his life was to be snuffed out in another minute. Tuck, dazed and frightened though he was, found himself taking pride in the old man and Quantrell, and even in Job, who was surely brave enough considering his years. In that moment when death seemed so near for them all, only Brasher and Safford failed in the test that exposed the very soul of every one of them.

Straight toward the frowning mountain's wall the boat reared and plunged, threatening every instant to capsize in the swirl of waters or to smash itself to pieces against one of the rocks that dotted the course of the rapids. Tuck held his breath. The precipice was so near that he could see the lichens on its gray, dripping face. Three seconds more, it seemed—five at most—and they would be swept crashing against it, or, worse still, be drawn down into the black depths beneath it.

And then—a miracle—in the crucial instant the wild river, at a high point of rock which had hidden its further course, turned sharply in almost a right angle and went roaring on triumphantly along the base of the cliff. Barely missing collision with the huge wall, the boat

turned with the current, and continued on its perilous way.

Again the river turned, rushing now in dark shadow between perpendicular walls which rose for two thousand feet on either side.

Tuck breathed again. At least they had another lease of life, though there was no telling whether it might not be a short one. The course of the stream was clearer now, and, though the water still roared and hissed and the boat rolled and tossed dangerously, there were very few rocks to menace them.

Gradually the swiftness of the current diminished, the channel grew deeper. One crisis was over, anyway, and Uncle Ezra began to hum a tune. Even Brasher plucked up his spirits—poor, nerve-wracked Brasher, who had not even had the chance of acting upon his favorite maxim, "Me first—that's my motto." Yet, unknown to him, his opportunity of proving those words was drawing very near.

Mile after mile they floated through a deep, narrow gorge into which the sunlight never entered. From far up near the sky-line white-coated mountain goats, clinging to narrow ledges of the precipices, peered timorously down at them. Every sound, the roar of the river, the crash of a rock falling from some dizzy height, the rattle of a pole or an oar against their boat,

their own voices, stirred all the echoes of the chasm and came rolling back to them again and again.

The gorge grew narrower, the current swifter; again the channel began to be strewn with rocks, threatening disaster. But after they had gone a few miles the walls became lower and stood farther apart, the stream broadened once more, and the sun shone in upon them. Strips of low, willow-covered land appeared on either side. The current slackened, became almost sluggish.

At a point from which they caught a glimpse of open, rolling country they drew their boat ashore, and stretched their cramped limbs. It was decided to cross the sandy river flats to the top of a ridge about a mile away, with the hope of gaining an idea of the surrounding country. The first to reach the ridge top was Job Danby, who, after one glimpse of what lay beyond, came scurrying back as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Injuns!" he cried breathlessly, as he rejoined the rest of the party. "By golly! I guess I ought to have stayed back in old Broadway with the horse cars and the stage coaches."

He had no more than spoken when half a dozen savages appeared on the ridge, and made motions for the party to come toward them.

"Not me," Job protested. "I'm gettin' homesick for that boat. Let's go back."

"INJUNS!" HE CRIED BREATHLESSLY, AS HE REJOINED THE REST OF THE PARTY.

But the Indians were armed with guns, and two of them held their weapons in a way that indicated they were prepared to shoot at quick notice.

"We'd better go ahead and take chances with 'em," Quantrell decided. "I've got a notion they want to be friendly."

Job, Tuck and Uncle Ezra went forward with Quantrell.

"Where's Brasher and Safford?" cried Tuck. The two men, who had been lagging behind ever since leaving the boat, had disappeared.

"Guess you'll never find those fellers takin' chances with Injuns," said Job. "They're prob'ly scared half to death hidin' in the willows somewheres."

"Let 'em hide," sneered Quantrell. "They wouldn't be any help to us no matter what happened."

When they had joined the Indians they saw on the other side of the ridge a group of lodges. The Indians spoke no English, but tried to make themselves understood by signs. Moving toward one of the wigwams, they made motions for Quantrell and his companions to follow. Inside this tepee sat a half-naked old savage, evidently the chief, who welcomed his white visitors, with a friendly smile. But it turned out that he, too, spoke only his own language, which Quantrell

found bore only slight resemblance to any of the Indian tongues east of the Rockies with which he was familiar. Quantrell's experience, however, told him that words would not be necessary in exchanging information. He was as skillful as any red man in the use of the universal sign language. He aked how far it was to "Mormonee," the land of the Mormons.

The old chief put out his left hand, then put two fingers of his right astride of it, making both go up and down with the motion of a man riding a horse. Then he shut his eyes, and laid his head on his hand three times, meaning that a man could ride to the Mormon settlement in three sleeps, or four days.

Through an equally ingenious means of communication, Quantrell asked how far it was to California by way of the river. Before answering, the old chief led them out of his tepee. Pointing down the stream, he shook his head dolefully. He picked up a crooked stick, and began to make a map in the sand. He began far to the north, on the Big Sandy, flourishing his stick as if he were driving oxen to indicate the emigrant road. All the way they had come since leaving the wagon train he made perfectly clear. He was correct in every detail.

Again he pointed down the stream, and shook

his head. Gathering some handfuls of stones, he placed them in two rows, piling them higher and higher. They were the canyon walls. A third time he pointed down the river, drew the rows close together, piled them higher still, and slowly raised his outstretched hands above them. A frightfully deep and narrow gorge lay below them. Even Job and Tuck could understand that. With his hands he made signs to show how their boat would roll and pitch in the rapids and would finally capsize, throwing them all out. Making signs of death, he showed them that it was a fatal place.

Shaking his head again, the chief suddenly became very grave. "Indiano" he repeated several times, and, reaching for his bow and arrows, he drew the bow to its utmost length, and put an arrow close to Quantrell's breast, showing how he would be shot.

"Thunder and lightning!" cried old Bellamy. "This wild heathen has saved the lot of us from sure death. This means we strike overland right now."

"That's what it means," Quantrell assented. He began to make arrangements with the friendly old savage to supply him with a gun, some powder and some knives in exchange for two pack ponies and some provisions.

A little later the party returned to where they had left their boat. It was gone, and with it their small remaining stock of food.

To the south for a long distance the river ran almost as straight as a drawn string. They gazed down its glimmering course. Far, far away a boat was sweeping along with the current, and in it they could barely discern two figures, mere specks—Brasher and Safford.

"I guess you were right about that fellow Brasher, Tuck," said Quantrell. "Safford, the poor weakling, isn't to be blamed so much, for Brasher always had him right under his thumb. But it don't matter. We've got our guns, our powder and our knives; there are two pack ponies and provisions waiting for us over at those wigwams. And we're safe. Those two treacherous rascals aren't. They're going to certain death."

It seemed to Tuck Simms, as he gazed down the river, that the words of Brasher were still echoing in his ears:

"Me first—that's my motto."

CHAPTER IX

THE MEN FROM THE DESERT

Dry, desolate plains, showing here and there sparse growths of sagebrush and cactus, stretched away in all directions. Far off were low, rolling, barren hills, and, twenty or thirty miles to the west, rose a high mountain, its summit tipped with snow.

In the bottom of a little gully was a muddy water hole. Warm, brackish water it was, but a valuable find in that dry country, where men wandered sometimes for days without a drop to moisten their parched throats.

Near this spot a party of four, two men and two boys, far astray from the main trail of the gold-hunting Forty-niners whose caravans were coiled over the plains all the way from the Missouri to the Sierras that summer, had made camp. One of the men, Jeff Quantrell, was on his way alone to the distant mountain, from which he hoped to get a view of the unknown country to the west that would enable him to decide on their

best course. Old Uncle Ezra Bellamy, who, in spite of his age, had borne up surprisingly well through the long, hard journey, was sleeping soundly on the bare ground with a horse blanket pulled over his face to shut out the glare of the sun. Two shaggy Indian ponies, lean and miserable, were trying to satisfy their hunger with grass so thin and dry and sparse that even a sheep would have scorned it.

Sitting on the hot sand, Tuck Simms and Job Danby were staring off into the direction Quantrell had taken, wondering whether the shrewd, experienced old-timer from the Santa Fe Trail would succeed in finding a way out of their troubles. For days the country had been growing worse and worse as they advanced, their food supply was running low, and it had become a serious question how long they would have to travel before finding more water, even such a muddy hole as the one that was now saving them from the agonies of thirst. The boys were listless, despondent. The hard conditions under which they had been living had worn down their youthful high spirits and made them moody, irritable, quick to find fault, full of glooming forebodings.

Slowly Tuck dragged himself to his feet, and, going to a clump of sagebrush, lifted a can from a hole in the sand which he had dug to keep his

water supply cool. The can was empty. He turned angrily to Job.

"You been at this water?" he demanded.

"Yep," replied Job indifferently.

"This can's mine," Tuck shouted. "You got no right to touch it. You go down to the hole and get your own supply. I'm not goin' to do your carryin' for you."

Job stolidly continued his inspection of the snow-tipped mountain. "It ain't goin' to hurt you none to lug up a can o' water now and then," he said sulkily.

The next moment the can came whirling through the air. Just too late, Job threw up an arm. The can struck his cheek, bruising the skin. He sprang up furious, looking about for a weapon. He knew Tuck was stronger than he, or he would have attacked him with his fists. There was neither stone nor stick anywhere, but a rawhide lariat was lying close by. He picked it up, and, running forward, swung it sharply across Tuck's face.

With a yell of pain, Tuck rushed for him. But Job was the faster of the two, and kept away easily, taunting his pursuer from a safe distance.

Before long Tuck gave up the hopeless chase. He was thirstier than ever now, after so much exertion in the sun, and, taking the empty can, he trudged down to the water hole grumbling.

There was a dangerous glitter in his eyes that boded no good to Job Danby. On the way he picked up the lariat, which Job had dropped.

For a long time after he had satisfied his thirst, Tuck sat beside the water hole, brooding vengeance. A red welt lay across his cheek. He bathed it with the muddy water, but the pain of it grew sharper and sharper in the burning sun.

"I'll get him!" he muttered. "I'll get him good for what he's done to me."

Picking up the lariat, he ran it through his fingers as he speculated over what he should do to Job Danby. Again and again the lariat came into his thoughts. As he studied the coils of rawhide, they stirred his thirst for vengeance. The thing seemed bewitched in its power to fan his anger and arouse all his worst impulses. And a savage strain had developed in Tuck through the days of hardship in the desert. Those dry, lonely wastes often had such an effect upon men, too, bringing out barbaric, cruel instincts that lie dormant in human beings under the veneers of civilization. He could make Job suffer with that lariat. He could lash him with it. He could twist it round his wrists until it cut deep into his skin. The more he brooded over it, the more possibilites the thing seemed to offer.

As he sat nursing his anger, a moving dot ap-

peared on the plain far off to the west. For the moment Tuck forgot about what he meant to do to Job Danby. He studied the moving speck, wondering whether it could be Quantrell, who surely could not have gone half way to the mountain in the short time he had been away.

The speck grew larger, and, as it moved forward, it developed into three figures, walking close together. Presently Tuck saw that two men were helping along a third, who could barely walk.

Climbing up from the water hole, he called to Uncle Ezra, who tossed the blanket from his face and sat up blinking into the sunshine. Full of interest at once, the old man watched the approaching figures.

"Looks like they was all three in trouble," he said. "The one in between can hardly walk at all, but the two that are draggin' him along aren't much better off."

Very slowly the three drew nearer. The one in the center appeared to be barely alive. His head was drooping, his legs giving way at the knees with every step. His companions were staggering against his weight. Yet they dragged him on without a pause, as if to stop and rest were impossible, straining every muscle, throwing their last bit of strength into the effort.

A few more moments, and Tuck and old Ezra

could see their faces distinctly. Drawn and emaciated, they looked more like the faces of mummies than of living men.

"They're starvin'!" cried Uncle Ezra. "Look at 'em! They're nothin' but skin and bone."

They came to the top of the gully, and one of them gave a hoarse cry as he caught sight of the water hole. The discovery seemed to put new life into them, and they tore down the steep slope so fast that Tuck expected to see them fall headlong. On arriving at the water they dropped on hands and knees, their faces over the muddy pool, drinking with long, choking gulps.

"I'll bet they're hungry enough to eat shoe-leather," said Ezra. "We better be gettin' some food ready for 'em, Tuck. It's pretty scarce, but I guess we can spare enough to give 'em a square meal. Jerked mule meat and beans ain't very appetizin' to most folks, but it'll sure seem good to them. Here, you, Job! Scare up some fuel."

Seeing that he was safe from Tuck for the time, Job set to work breaking up dry sagebrush branches and piling them up for a fire, while old Ezra hobbled down to the water hole.

After dark that evening, Tuck sat staring out over the starlit plain, fingering the lariat, nursing his grievance, oblivious of everything else, even of the two strangers who, refreshed and

strengthened now after eating and resting, sat near him talking with old Ezra and Job. The man they had helped across the plain lay flat on his back on a blanket, deep in the sleep of utter exhaustion.

One of the strangers turned a haggard, grimy face to the silent Tuck. "That's a likely lookin' lariat you got there, son," he said, picking up the strip of rawhide and examining it. "Good deal like the one we had." He glanced at his companion, and, after a moment of silence, added, "I reckon we could tell a story about a lariat like this, eh, Aleck?"

"I reckon we could, Mac," the other man answered. "If it hadn't been for that lariat of ours we'd not be here to-night. We'd be lyin' out in the desert by now with the wolves feedin' on us."

Mac nodded his head solemnly. "That's where we'd be," he assented. "Out on the desert, picked to the bone, by now."

He stared out over the cruel country they had come from, and shuddered.

"But how did the lariat save you?" asked Tuck, his interest aroused at last.

The man did not seem to hear the question. His eyes were still fixed on the bleak western sky line, as if his thoughts were far away in the waterless alkali wastes that lay there. His pipe

glowed brightly, its smoke rising high in a thin spiral and scattering slowly, for not a breath of air was astir. The night was as silent as death. And like an image of death itself the man seemed as he sat there, his drawn, sunken face thrust forward, his bony hands spread out on his thin, sharp knees, his long, yellow teeth showing now and then as his lips drew away from the pipe stem.

Tuck leaned forward, holding his breath in fear of missing some feebly-spoken word, for he was convinced that this forlorn stranger, who had come to them out of the very shadow of death, was about to lift the mystery of what had happened out in that ghostly land beyond the western horizon.

CHAPTER X

THE LARIAT

"THERE was four of us at the start," the man began at last. "There's one lyin' out there somewheres—what's left of him. We was bound overland with a wagon train, headed for the gold fields, when the notion struck Aleck and me that we'd try the Green River and let it carry us as far as it would toward the Pacific. Sandy Rowan wanted to join us, and we agreed to take him. Then Rufe Grover's horse broke a leg, and he had to shoot him, so he thought he'd come, too. We got some logs, and tied 'em together with strips cut from the hide of Rufe's horse to make a raft.

"By an' bye, after we'd travelled down the river for a spell, we struck the rapids, and had to give it up. After we'd landed, with our minds made up to foot it across country and get to the mines somehow if luck was with us, we figured we could carry all our supplies on our backs. We took our guns, food, every cussed thing we had,

even the strips of hide that held the raft together. Rufe tied 'em into a long string, and wound 'em round his waist. Said they reminded him of his dead horse, and that he might find another horse 'fore long and that he'd need a good lariat to fasten him with. Rufe was always a savin' critter, the kind that picks up pins and counts pennies. Dunno why he ever wanted to go to the gold mines. He'd have got rich back where he come from just from savin' up junk.

"After a long time we come to a wagon train headin' down from Salt Lake. They'd got the idea that they could find a way that would take them south of the Sierras to the coast. We was all four fairly well primed with money, and when the wagon owners sold each of us a horse and saddle we figured our troubles was about over. We rode on ahead, and we never got a look at them wagons again. But I'd bet my last dollar they never got through the way they was goin'. That's no country for wagons, nor for horses; nor for human bein's either. It's the land o' death. That's what I call it, the land o' horrible death."

For a moment he was silent, his sunken eyes turned to the desert. Then he held out his sunken hands, and stared at them as if he doubted they could be his own. They were more like the claws of some huge bird than human hands.

"The water holes was gettin' mighty scarce," he continued; "and food was even scarcer. For days an' days there wasn't a livin' thing to shoot at. The stuff on our backs was pretty nigh gone, and we didn't dare to eat more'n enough to keep us alive. Once in a long spell we'd bring down a rabbit, and that would help some; but by an' bye the country got too bad for even them things to live in.

"But we kept goin' on, and 'fore long we got out onto a flat plain that was as white as snow. It wasn't snow; it was nothin' but salt, miles and miles of salt, with the sun shinin' down on it so dazzlin' that our eyes burned and we could scarce see our way. We had to drink a lot o' water with all the hot, hard travellin' we was doin', and bye an' bye our canteens was empty. Not a water hole nowheres. We had food, but we couldn't eat it. It would stick in our dried-up throats so we couldn't swallow it.

" 'Let's go back,' says Sandy Rowan. 'I don't wanter see no gold mines. I wanter go home.'

"But I says, 'No, we're not goin' back. I started out to reach the gold country, and I'm goin' to get to it or die. I won't turn back after all I've been through in the way of sufferin' an' torment.'

"And Aleck chimes in, 'That's me. I won't go back. I got a notion we're goin' to get to the

mountains 'fore long, where there'll be water.' Ain't that just what you says, Aleck?"

Aleck turned his pinched, sun-dried face to his companion, and nodded. "That's what I said," he answered. "I wasn't goin' back. But I might o' changed my mind if I'd known what lay before us."

"At that Rufe speaks up. 'I'll stick,' says he, ' 'til we get to the gold country or drop dead on the way. And if you go back you'll go back alone, Sandy Rowan.'

"So we went on. But we didn't talk no more after that. Our throats was too dry, and every time we opened our mouths they got drier. The horses suffered more'n we did, I reckon, and after a time Aleck's horse drops and rolls over on his side. We couldn't get him up, and we left him lyin' there. Then Rufe's horse gives out, and we had to leave him, too, the four of us takin' turns ridin' the two horses that we had left.

"Somehow, more dead than alive, we got across that salt plain and into some dry hills. Not a thing growin' there but a few thin clumps o' sagebrush. Not a sign of water anywheres. But Rufe had heard somewheres that in that kind of a country men had to go up instead of down to find water, there bein' a little snow on top o' the high hills sometimes. The hills kept

gettin' higher an' higher, and we kept climbin' up and up till night came. We lay down to rest, but we couldn't sleep, not a wink. We was too thirsty for that. We lay there sufferin' till daylight came; and then Rufe finds on the rocks a little thin ice, no thicker than a watch glass. We put some of it into our mouths, and felt better. All the rest of it we stowed into our canteens to let it melt. Lucky we found it 'fore the day got well started, for it wouldn't o' lasted five minutes in the sun. We gave each o' the horses a sip, just enough to wet their mouths, and then we went on—went on west, always headin' west."

"Always headin' west," echoed Aleck proudly. "There was three of us that was no quitters."

"Three of us that was no quitters, Aleck. Three of us that never gave a look behind, nary a look. But Sandy Rowan wasn't made o' the same stuff. There was a quittin' streak in him. I reckon he hadn't been as strong as the rest of us from the start, and he seemed to suffer more and get weak faster than we did.

" 'Let's go back,' he kept urgin'. 'Let's go back. I don't wanter die out here in the desert. I wanter see my home again.'

"It got so we didn't pay no attention to him after a while. We just let him keep on urgin' and whinin' without givin' a word in answer, for we was goin' to keep on headin' west if

it killed us—always headin' west, eh, Aleck?"

"Always headin' west," echoed Aleck. "Nothin' but starvin' and thirstin' ahead of us, but always headin' west." And Tuck Simms, as he caught sight of the gleam in the man's tired eyes and the triumphant look on his worn face, began to understand the pride and grim determination with which the dauntless three had pushed their way over the desert.

"Along toward the end o' the day," Mac continued, "we come across a little pool of water in the rocks, just in time to save us from goin' ravin' mad with thirst. There was enough of it for us and the horses, but nothin' left for the canteens, and to the west of us as far as we could see, for miles and miles, the country looked drier than ever. But we wasn't goin' to give up, not anybody exceptin' Sandy Rowan. We'd sworn we'd never turn back, Rufe and Aleck and me, and we wasn't the kind to go back on our words.

"It was gettin' dark, when Sandy's horse stuck a foot into a cleft o' the rocks, and fell with a broken leg. Sandy had to shoot him, and he cried like a baby over the poor, dyin' beast that had carried him all that long ways. A soft-hearted cuss, Sandy, even though he was a quitter. But losin' that horse was a good thing, in one way, for our food was just about gone. We skinned the body, cut it into strips, and, when

daylight come, started off carryin' enough jerked horse meat to last for a week. A couple o' days later Rufe shot a wolf, and that was a heap sight better than the horse meat. We didn't do no more worryin' for a while about food, but looked more'n ever as if we was goin' to die from thirst.

"One night, after we'd seen some Injun tracks, we chose a place to sleep against the wall of a ledge, where we wasn't likely to be surprised, and we left my horse down below in the gulch. For an hour or so Sandy kept us awake with his whinin' about turnin' back. That was just about all he seemed to think of all day and all night. I reckon the desert and the sufferin' we'd been through had turned his head a little, for he was lookin' mighty queer, and there was a wild glitter in his eyes. We had to get up and cuss him good 'fore he'd give us a rest.

"Mornin' come, and we got up, rubbin' the dry sand out of our eyes. 'Where's Sandy?' says Rufe. We looked around, and there was only three of us against that ledge, Rufe and Aleck and me. Then we took a look down into the gulch, and we seen that my horse was gone.

" 'He's quit us,' says Rufe. 'Quit and stole your horse, Mac—the derned yaller cur!'

"That's what he'd done—left us and stole my horse. We stood starin' at each other for a min-

ute, sort of bewildered, but there was a look in the eyes of each one of us, I reckon, that didn't bode no good to Sandy Rowan if we ever got hands on him.

" 'Killin's too good for a man like him,' I says, 'but I'll kill him if I ever meet him.' And Rufe and Aleck swears they'll do the same. When men's throats are dried up with thirst and they're half dead they see red when they're crossed. The desert was swimmin' round me, and my head wa'n't any too clear, but there was one notion inside of it that was clear enough, which was to kill Sandy Rowan.

" 'We'll follow him up,' says Rufe. 'He can't have got far, an' we can travel as fast as that old, played-out horse o' yours.'

" 'That's just what we'll do,' Aleck agrees. 'Horse stealin's a hangin' crime back in the country Mac and me comes from, and we got a good right to kill the crittur.'

" 'We can't hang him," I says, ' 'cause we got nothin' to hang him with, and we can't shoot him 'cause our powder's all gone, but we'll kill him somehow.'

"We went skirmishin' round to find out what else Sandy'd took with him, fearin' the jerked meat was all gone and that he'd left us to starve. A crittur that would steal a horse would do as much as that. But this one hadn't. He'd took

only a little bit o' the food—less'n his share. It was gettin' home that was all he was pinin' for. There wa'n't no spite in him, an' I reckon he'd wanted to give us a chance. He'd been gettin' pretty weak to walk, and he musta' wanted that horse o' mine just to carry him. But that wa'n't what we wanted it for. We'd been countin' on it for food. When our jerk was gone that horse woulda' saved us.

"'Fore long Rufe, who'd gone down into the gully, gives a yell. Lookin' down we seen he'd picked up the lariat, the same old lariat that had held our raft together. Dry as a bone it was, after draggin' along through the sand all those miles behind us, but stronger than any rope ever made. 'Hangin's the only proper way to finish a horse thief,' says Rufe, 'and we can hang Sandy Rowan now all right. If we can't find a tree we'll swing him offen a ledge, but he's goin' to swing at the end of this rawhide if I foller him a thousand miles.'

"So we turns back at last. Not that we wasn't countin' on headin' west again, but we was goin' to get Sandy Rowan first."

Tuck Simms looked at the man who lay sleeping. So they did get Sandy Rowan, he thought, and this wreck of a man on the blanket must be Rufe Grover.

"We took up the crittur's trail," Mac went on,

"and we stuck to it like bloodhounds. And like bloodhounds our tongues was hangin' out with thirst many a time. More'n oncet when we made up our minds we was done for, we'd find a little pool of warm water in the rocks, just enough to keep us alive a few hours more, and we went staggerin' on, our hate for Sandy Rowan 'bout all that kept our courage goin'. Surprisin' thing how hate can put a little more life into men that's as good as dead.

"Dazed and a little off in our heads a good part o' that time we was, I reckon, but we didn't forget to keep the lariat along. Oncet in a long time from some high place we'd get a sight of Rowan, miles and miles off, ridin' slow, the old horse kickin' up the alkali dust. We hoped he was sufferin' from thirst, like we was. I was wishin' that when we got to him we'd find him half mad for lack of a drink, and that we'd have our canteens full to show to him and to pull away when he reached for 'em. I wanted to watch him reachin' for that water with his tongue hangin' out, and the three of us laughin' at him. Surprisin' thing how hate can get hold of a man and make a devil out of him.

"So the days went by, till we felt sure Sandy couldn't keep goin' much longer. We'd have dropped in our tracks ourselves long before if it hadn't been for our longin' to get our hands on

him and see him die. Whenever we got a sight of him way off on the desert my fingers would go to the lariat, wound round my wrist, and I'd feel of it and get to gloatin' over how he'd look at the end of it. And whenever I'd get to feelin' I couldn't move another step nohow, I'd finger that old strip of rawhide, and it would put new life into me. Yeah. I know now that I'd be lyin' out on the desert to-night with the wolves pickin' at me if it hadn't been for that old lariat.

"By an' bye our food give out, and we had to starve as well as thirst. For a whole day we went without a mouthful to eat and no more'n a few drops to drink. And then Rufe killed a crow with a stone. We ate it—ate it raw, for we couldn't wait to cook it. It was better than nothin'. It kept us alive a little longer. But I'll have to be dyin' o' hunger again before I'll ever touch another mouthful of that kind of bird. Then we found some rose seed buds, and they kept us goin' a while. But it looked as if we couldn't hold out much more. We was gettin' that weak that it was all we could do to drag our feet along.

"And then one day we found him. Yeah, we found Sandy Rowan, the man we'd starved and thirsted to get over all those miles of desert. The horse was gone—dead, somewheres far back, we figured—and Sandy was lyin' on his back, his

eyes closed, and mighty nigh to bein' dead himself.

"When I looked at him lyin' there my legs began to give under me, and I shook all over. I'd figured so long on gettin' him, and I'd been gloatin' over it so long that it seemed as if it couldn't be true. But there he was, lyin' there, Sandy Rowan all right, even though he was no more'n half alive. Yet he wasn't much worse off than we was, and there wasn't more'n half a chance that any of us would be livin' more'n a day or two longer.

"The three of us stood just starin' at him—just starin' without sayin' a word, as if we was seein' somethin' in a dream. We'd none of us been very clear in our heads for a long time, and it was sorter hard to make up our minds that we wasn't just imaginin' we was lookin' at him.

"Then Rufe steps up to him, and drops down on his hands and knees, and peers out of his weak, sunburned eyes at somethin' in Rowan's hand. He takes hold o' the thing and brings it to us. It was nothin' but the picture of a little girl, with the words 'To Daddy' scrawled under it. Yeah. That was all it was. But it was enough to set the three of us cryin' like babies. We was that weak that it didn't take much to make us cry. We'd been thinkin' of our own families a lot out there on the desert, and all of a

sudden we began to understand how a man could turn horse thief and desert his friends to get back home when he had a thing like that in his pocket.

"'Where's the lariat?' asks Rufe. I hadn't been fingerin' the thing none while I stood there. I'd forgot all about that strip o' rawhide. But I grabbed it with a growl when I heard Rufe speak.

"'We ain't goin' to string him up,' I says. 'Not now. I've changed my mind. I reckon I got some glimmerin' now of why he quit us.'

"'No,' says Rufe. 'We're not goin' to string him up. We're goin' to save him if we can. We got to save him. Since I got a look at that there picture I can't stand thinkin' of leavin' him out here to die. That little girl's waitin' for him somewheres, and we got to save him somehow.'

"'What's the lariat got to do with it?' I says.

"Rufe scratched his head for a minute. Then he answers, 'I got a sudden notion into my head. Gimme the lariat.' So I give it to him, wonderin' what he was goin' to do with it.

"There was a little water in the canteens, just enough to keep us goin' another day, and he took it, and poured it all together, except a little bit for a few drinks. There was water in Rowan's can, too, but he hadn't a morsel of food with him, so we knew he must be starvin' to death instead of thirstin'.

"Rufe started a fire, and he put the water over it to boil. Then he began to cut up the lariat. He dropped the pieces into the water, and boiled 'em. When he got through he had a mess o' stuff like jelly, as fine a food as a starvin' man could ask for.

"And it saved Sandy Rowan's life, that old lariat did. Saved his life, and saved Aleck's life, and saved mine. The thing that we'd meant to kill Rowan with saved us all—all exceptin' Rufe Grover. When he got through with the job, and he saw Sandy gettin' better he fell all in a heap. He'd just been livin' on hate for days, and he hadn't no more strength left now to keep him up. Rufe's out there in the desert to-night, what's left of him."

The man stared out into the west with dulled eyes and lapsed into silence. Aleck dragged himself to his feet, and went to the man who lay on the blanket. "I reckon we'll pull Sandy Rowan through yet," he said, as he watched the sleeping man's haggard face.

Tuck's fingers stole to his lariat. . . . It seemed to him that the thing had a curse on it, and, with a sudden impulse, he threw it far off into the dark. Then he stepped over to Job Danby. "Job," he said, "we're out in a bad country, where quarrelin' is easy. But we got to be friends, you and me. Let's make up."

CHAPTER XI

THE ONLY CHANCE

Old Zeke Yawby came trailing down from Salt Lake with Maria, his mule, to take chances on making his way to the California gold fields through the unknown country to the south. A small wagon train was heading in the same direction, and Old Zeke and Maria "horned in" to the party.

As the country through which they passed became more and more barren and dreary, and the water holes more and more difficult to find, the wagon owners—all but one—discouraged, and afraid of what might lie before them, turned back, one or two at a time, until only Jim Larimer's wagon was still rumbling on into the land of mystery. But Larimer was not left alone. He had with him his wife, his two small children, and Old Zeke.

"Maria and me never quit once we make up our minds to a thing," Old Zeke said whenever a wagon turned back or the way grew rougher than

usual. "We'll stick to the finish. How 'bout it, Maria?" And Maria, with a toss of her head, would flatten her long ears back and look as grimly determined as only a mule can look.

"Yes, sir," Old Zeke would add; "when Maria makes up her mind to a thing, nothing can budge her. She's got a will of her own, Maria has. Stubborn? Why, Maria's got Noah Webster skinned a mile when it comes to sheddin' light on what that there word signifies."

It was a few miles south of Sevier Lake, which lies a good two-weeks' march south of the Mormons' stronghold, that Jeff Quantrell, Tuck Simms, Job Danby and Uncle Ezra Bellamy, coming west from Green River, joined the little Larimer party. They had two shaggy, half-starved Indian ponies with them, but very little food and no water, and the sighting of the big white canvas top of Larimer's wagon in the distance had saved them from thirst and probably from hunger. Their arrival was a relief to Larimer, even though his own food and water supplies were running dangerously low. He could see but little hope of help from Tuck and Job, as they were only boys, and scarcely more from "Uncle" Ezra, who seemed to him to be too old for such a country, but he at once recognized Quantrell as a shrewd, experienced plainsman, who could surely give him valuable advice in his difficulties.

Although Old Zeke and Maria seemed as confident as ever, Larimer was getting worried. He could see twenty or thirty barren miles spread out before him to the west of Sevier Lake, and they seemed to offer very little chance of finding either food or water. And it was now too late to turn back. His oxen had grown so weak and emaciated, his supplies so low, that he did not dare try to return over the waterless wastes that lay to the north.

Before long Larimer realized that not only Quantrell but Tuck Simms was a valuable addition to his party, for if there was any game within miles of them Tuck was pretty sure to find it and certain to bring it down when found. With the food supply so low, Tuck knew how serious it would be to miss his mark, and never had he shot with more deadly accuracy than in his rambles through those desolate hills. It was a lucky day, back in Independence, when he came into possession of his breech-loading rifle. They were necessarily long-distance shots, most of them, and, while the old smooth-bore muskets might be almost as accurate for sixty or seventy yards as the new-fashioned, rifled barrels that were coming into the market, it was largely guess work with them beyond that range.

Quantrell was even better than Tuck as a hunter, and, in that dangerous land, where every

few days signs of roaming bands of savages were discovered, his long experience with Indians gave everybody in the party confidence. It was always Quantrell who found these signs first. "He can smell an Injun ten miles off," was Old Zeke's comment.

But before long, as they advanced into the desert, neither Quantrell nor Tuck could find game of any kind. Two weeks west of Sevier Lake the food supply gave out, and Larimer had to kill one of his raw-boned oxen to save the party from starving. When that was gone another ox was killed; then another. For many days at a time there was nothing to eat but jerked meat. It was miserable fare, dry, stringy, and without a morsel of fat, for the oxen had not found much grass for many a long mile. When Tuck or Quantrell killed a lone rabbit it was an occasion to be remembered.

Old Zeke seemed to be the only member of the party whose spirits were not affected by being reduced to living on the worst kind of jerk. The old man would sit gazing westward over the desert and dry, rock-walled mountains, puffing his pipe complacently, as if the prospect had no terrors for him. Indeed, Old Zeke's only worries were for Maria. He never complained about his own condition, but it disturbed him to see Maria go hungry.

"Don't you worry, Maria," he would say, as the gaunt mule sauntered up to him and rubbed her nose caressingly against his gray whiskers. "We'll put through somehow. We been in many a tight place, you and me, and we always did pull through, didn't we, somehow?"

Maria would stand, ears cocked, staring solemnly into Old Zeke's face for a few moments, then toss her head knowingly. She seemed to understand every word he spoke to her. Maria had brains, better brains than most of her species, which is saying a good deal, for anybody who has had long experience with mules knows they are more intelligent than most animals and more so than either the jackass or the horse, though they are the offspring of both. She always discovered the best grass before the horses or the slow-witted oxen came to it. Old Zeke spent most of his time helping her search for grazing spots. Whenever he found one, though often it might have only a few dry blades of grass scarcely worth nibbling at, he would hurry back to her with the news. Then she would go trotting off after him, full of eagerness to see what he had discovered. Consequently Maria's condition remained better than that of the other animals, which wasted away almost to nothing more than skin and bones.

This was more than could be said for Old Zeke.

He had been a gaunt, cadaverous-looking old fellow at the start, but now he looked like a walking skeleton. His age and the hardships of the trail were telling on him rapidly, and every day he seemed to grow weaker, though he was as hopeful and determined as ever.

"We'll pull through, Maria; we'll pull through somehow," he assured his companion again and again, when even Maria took to surveying the sun-baked land to the west with a troubled eye.

Larimer was not so confident. "I guess we've about come to the end of our rope," he announced dejectedly one evening after they had at last reached a water hole at the end of an eight-hours' march without a drop to drink. "My wife and children are so weak they can't go on without better food."

Quantrell studied a mountain range, which stood far off on the western horizon. "I guess you're right, Jim," he said. "You better stay right here. There's water enough in the hole, and with the oxen you've got left you'd have jerk enough to last a long time."

"What happens when the jerk gives out?" asked Larimer. "Then we just roll over and die, eh?"

Quantrell's eyes were still fixed on the distant range. "I've got a notion that California lies just the other side of those mountains, Jim," he

answered. "I figure that some of us would have a good chance of getting across 'em and back here again with some fresh supplies in about two weeks. It's worth trying, anyhow."

For a moment Larimer stared gloomily into Quantrell's face. "Jeff," he said at last, "there ain't one man in a hundred that would try to cross that desert again if he was ever lucky enough to get to California. But I guess you would. If you knew there was a woman and children waiting for you you'd come back all right—if you didn't die on the way."

"I'll take Tuck and Job with me," Quantrell continued. "They're not quite full grown yet, but they're strong, and they could stand the trip about as well as a man could. We'll take the two horses and Zeke's mule."

"What!" exclaimed Old Zeke, who was standing near by. "You'll take Maria? Not unless you take me, too. Where Maria goes I go."

"No, Zeke; you're too old," Quantrell answered. "You wouldn't last a day, not at the pace I'm going to set. And we'll need that mule of yours. She's far better than either of the horses."

A stubborn look came into Old Zeke's eyes, then slowly faded out. He looked down at his shrunken body, then glanced at Maria, and his lips quivered. His gaze turned to Larimer's frail wife and to

the two listless, hungry children. He shook his gray head sadly.

"No, I could never make it," he admitted. "I'm gettin' old. I know it now. The time's come when Maria and me's got to separate. You can take her, Jeff. And she'll get there. You can bet your life on that. She'll get there—and back again, too. Come here, Maria."

Maria walked up to him, and rubbed him fondly with her nose. He whispered into one of her long ears, and an expression of pained surprise came into her shrewd, solemn face. Presently she gave a deep sigh, and moved slowly away, her eyes on the west.

"She knows every word I say to her," said Old Zeke, a suspicion of a sob in his voice. "She don't want to leave me, but she will all right. You won't have no trouble with her, Jeff. But if I hadn't spoke to her you couldn't budge her a foot."

Night closed in on the little party. Quantrell, Tuck and Job were up late making their preparations for the journey. With the first light of day they set out toward the far-off mountains that lay against the western sky line.

Soon they were out of sight of the little group by the wagon at the water hole; but not of Old Zeke. He had climbed a little ridge, and from its top he waved his bony arms at their fast-disap-

pearing figures. Maria turned, and looked at him. Quantrell tried to turn her about, but he might as well have tried to budge a mountain. A wild, yearning, grief-stricken bray broke the silence of the desert.

"Goodbye, Maria!" shouted Old Zeke. "You'll get there, old gal! You'll get there—and back again, too."

Then Maria turned again to the west, her ears flattened back, her head thrust forward, and ambled on, a picture of unswervable determination.

CHAPTER XII

MARIA PULLS THROUGH

Out of the mountains came a man, two boys, two shaggy Indian ponies and a mule. The man and the boys were ragged, emaciated. Their heads drooped; their eyes glared feverishly in their haggard faces. As for the animals, they were scarcely more than bones and loose-hanging hide.

The party moved slowly, for there was but little life left in either human beings or beasts. They had come out of the desert, out of a land of hunger and thirst, out of the very shadow of death.

Before them now lay a green valley, where fat, sleek cattle were cropping the long, thick grass. Ahead of them, beyond many acres of rich pasture land and in the shade of far-spreading live oaks, a low, rambling ranch house of white, sun-baked bricks gleamed from behind masses of red rambler roses.

The fagged mule and horses sniffed the air

eagerly, their ears cocked forward. They smelled water. And presently they came to a little stream, rushing, crystal clear, over a clean, white, sandy bed, where the travelers quenched their thirst for the first time in many hours. The cool water quickly brought a wonderful change in them, and, crossing the stream, they moved on with quicker steps, feeling stronger and in higher spirits than for many days, though none of them had eaten since the previous morning, unless the animals had succeeded in finding a few stray blades of dry grass now and then on the arid hills. And half an hour later the whole party were satisfying their hunger from the bountiful supplies of a Mexican hacienda.

So it was that Jeff Quantrell, Tuck Simms and Job Danby found the long-sought California. To them the fertile valley seemed like a paradise. Through dreadful days and nights they had endured the torments of hunger and thirst. More than once they had been close to death, when the discovery of a pool of warm, brackish water in the rocks had saved them. It seemed miraculous that they and the animals had all come through alive. It seemed that it would be even more of a miracle if they should again succeed in making their way across those long, dreary miles of desert to the little party they had left at the far-off water hole.

Quantrell, life-long plainsman, long accustomed to hardship and danger, regarded the return journey with stoical indifference. Many times before he had risked death and endured the pangs of hunger and thirst; he could do so again. To him it was merely a part of the routine of life. But Tuck and Job dreaded the prospect of going back into that desert from which they had so narrowly escaped. It would be like going once more through a frightful nightmare from which they had not quite wakened.

"Reckon you and Job had better stay here," said Quantrell to Tuck as the preparations were being made for the journey. "You've both had about enough of the desert. It's got on your nerves. I'll make the trip alone."

Tuck talked the matter over with Job. "I'd rather be shot, and die quick and easy, than go back there," Job declared. "If we go back we're liable to die mighty slow and painful, and I know now what it means to go without water or food for days at a stretch. That desert's got me scared clear through. Makes me shudder every time I think of it."

"Me, too," Tuck admitted. "Haven't looked to the west once since we've been here. Can't abide the sight of them hills, knowing what lies beyond 'em. But s'pose Jeff Quantrell dies out there alone. We'd never forgive ourselves. And

that mule Maria has taken a sort of liking to me. She'd go better if I was along."

They turned to look at Old Zeke's mule as she stood near by in the green pasture. She was staring solemnly at the mountains. Again and again they had seen her standing so, her thoughts apparently far away from the rich grass that absorbed the attention of the horses.

"By golly!" Job cried. "She can look to the west without a shudder all right. And I'll bet she's dead set on going back. Old Zeke knew what he was talking about. That mule won't be no quitter."

A look of sudden determination came into Tuck's eyes. "I reckon I'm as good as a mule," he declared. "Maria knows what that desert is as well as we do, but she's got more spunk than either of us. I'm not going to let any ornery mule show more spunk than me."

"That's what I've been thinking," agreed Job. "We got something to learn from Maria. Many the time I got courage from her when I was ready to lie down and die over there. Guess we better go along, too, Tuck. Guess we better show Maria we got just as much spunk as she has."

So that settled it. They just couldn't let that mule Maria show that she was made of better stuff than they.

Quantrell smiled grimly when he heard their

decision. "You youngsters have sure got grit," he said, "and I'm proud of you. You know now what you can expect. It's going to be a mighty hard pull getting back to that water hole, just as it was coming, but we'll have all the food we want as long as the animals hold out. I've got plenty of sacks of beans and flour, and a lot of good meat, and those folks we've left over there will have a good square meal at last if we manage to get to 'em. This stuff we've got ought to make those poor little starved kids of Larimer's fat again. But all the food in the world wouldn't be much use to us if we can't find water to wash it down with."

They set out by a different route than the one by which they had come, for Quantrell meant to get higher into the mountains, where he had hopes of finding snow water. The horses were sullen and rebellious when they found themselves going into the desert again, but Maria was full of eagerness. She seemed glad to get away from the fertile valley where life had been so easy and luxurious, and she never showed a sign of tiring on the steep, hot climbs which fagged the horses so quickly.

"Just look at her," said Tuck. "She's got her eye fixed in the direction of that old water hole every minute. She's just made up her mind that she's going to get back to Old Zeke, and we

couldn't stop her if we tried. The derned, stubborn mule! She don't even bother 'bout looking for grass any more."

"I've a notion that Maria's going to get back there, even if we don't," Quantrell said. "When a mule once makes up its mind to do a thing it does it, and all Creation can't stop it. Too bad more human beings aren't that way."

Thirty miles they traveled that first day before they came to water, and there was precious little of it, even then—just enough to fill the canteens and to wet the mouths of the animals. By this time the horses' heads were drooping sadly, and they seemed too weak to carry their packs. The next morning their loads were transferred to Maria, who, though she already was well burdened with supplies, seemed not to mind the additional weight. She was the most docile little animal that could be imagined, and she seemed born for the desert. Far better than the horses, for her wits were quicker than theirs, she understood the art of getting a living in such a country, cropping every spear of grass and every green leaf of sagebrush that she passed. She drank sparingly, even on those rare occasions when there was water enough for all. It is not wise to gorge one's self with water after a long thirst, but most animals don't know that. Sometimes she would turn aside to go after some patch of

grass her lone, ever-watchful eye had caught sight of, but she would always return promptly and take her place in the line. In high places her little unshod hooves would cling like a goat's to the steep rocks. The horses might slip and fall, but never Maria.

"Just see how careful and sure she is," Quantrell remarked one day as they were going up a steep, narrow canon, where the horses stumbled, slid, and floundered desperately on the rocks. "She knows Old Zeke's heart is aching for her."

Half dead with thirst, the horses held their heads low as they crept slowly along, and only continual urging kept them moving. It was plain that they would not last the day out if water were not found. Their loss would not be serious if all should go well with Maria, but, if anything should happen to the mule, the lack of horses would destroy all hope of getting the supplies to the half-famished party at the water hole.

It was near the end of this deep crevice in the mountains that a perpendicular ledge fifteen feet high blocked their way. To get back and try some other route was impossible. It would take many hours, perhaps days. Their strength would not be equal to it, and they would die of thirst. They must get over the ledge. They must get over the ledge, or die. And, harder still, they must get Maria over, even if not the horses, if

the men and frail mother and hungry children at the water hole were to be saved.

"Reckon we're done for," gasped Job despairingly. The boy's throat was so dry that he could scarcely speak.

Maria cocked her one eye at the ledge, then studied the towering walls of the canon. The problem was too much for her at the moment, and she turned a look of anxious inquiry at Tuck.

"There's only one chance," Quantrell concluded, after a careful investigation of their surroundings. "Over there on the canon wall is a narrow shelf that runs clear through to the top of the ledge. It begins pretty low down, and if we could pile up enough rocks for the animals to climb up to it we might get 'em over, though it seems scarcely possible."

They set to work at once building a rough, inclined pathway to the shelf. When at last it was ready they tried to urge the horses to climb it. It proved to be hopeless. The exhausted animals had neither the strength nor the courage for the effort.

"That means goodbye horses," said Quantrell. "Now we'll try the mule."

All the ropes in the outfit were tied together to form a long leading line. Holding an end of this line, Tuck succeeded in climbing the wall to a point far above the shelf. The other end was held

by Quantrell, at the bottom of the canon, after he had fastened the line to Maria. The mule's heavy load was taken from her, and Job urged her up the incline. She made the climb without the slightest hesitation, and, as she came to the shelf, which was scarcely five inches wide, Quantrell and Tuck steadied her with the line.

Each of the three held his breath as he watched her. If she should balk, if she should fall, it would mean almost certain death to the party at the water hole.

But Maria seemed to know that Old Zeke's life was in her keeping at that critical moment. Cautiously as a cat she moved forward, sometimes leaning gently on the rope at some unusually difficult spot, carefully selecting a place before putting down a foot. The shelf rose higher and higher, until Quantrell stood thirty feet below her. There was no turning back for Maria now. She must go on along that dizzy, narrow path, which a man would have to cross on hands and knees, or be dashed to death. If a foot should slip all would be over. Once she hesitated, looked down, trembling. It seemed impossible that she could gain the ledge.

"Throw a rock at her!" cried Job. "Don't let her stop!"

"No, no," Quantrell ordered sharply. "She'd

fall then sure. Give her time. Keep her cool. It's our only chance."

Maria drew a long breath. The light of desperation gleamed in her eye. Again she moved forward, slowly, cautiously—oh, so cautiously!—making sure of every step before shifting her weight to an advancing foot.

Now the shelf ran sharply downward. It was getting harder and harder for her to keep her balance. But still she crept on. Then suddenly, four feet from the top of the ledge, she stopped, gave a spring, and landed safely at the goal.

Tuck gave a triumphant cry. Maria was saved. He felt sure that she had saved the party at the water hole, too; and in his elation he forgot his thirst and the dreadful march that still lay before them. The desert seemed robbed of its terrors for the moment.

The supplies were pulled up the ledge, and Maria was reloaded. There was no hope of saving the poor horses. They must be left to die. Indeed, they were half dead already, and, even if there had been a way of getting them over the ledge, they could scarcely have survived the remainder of the journey.

The party marched on. Night came. Still no water. The moon rose over barren, desolate hills, and death seemed to be brooding over the desert.

At last the sun came up, a huge, angry ball of fire, spreading burning heat through the dry air. Its light disclosed a tiny sheet of fast-melting ice on the rocks, just enough to moisten the mouths of Quantrell and the boys, but no more—not a drop for poor Maria. That day, as they marched on through the heat, they pulled every blade of grass they could find to suck the moisture from its root. They put pebbles into their mouths to stir the saliva. Not a morsel of food would their dry throats swallow.

The days that followed brought but little relief. Now and then they found a little water, just enough to keep them all alive—barely alive. Even Maria's head drooped low at last. She was suffering, poor little beast, and her steps were slow and feeble. But she never faltered. Always her lone eye was fixed on the bleak eastern sky line, and it gleamed with desperate determination. Old Zeke was waiting for her there. No matter how she suffered from thirst, hunger and weariness, she meant to get back to Old Zeke. One look at her was enough to convince anybody of that fact. And many a time, when Tuck and Job, weak and despairing, were ready to lie down and give up the struggle they would see in Maria's eye the indomitable look that defied the desert to conquer her, and would take new hope and courage.

"We're as good as a mule," Tuck would say. "Maria isn't afraid, and we oughtn't to give up as long as she don't."

At last came a day when even Quantrell's courage gave out. Their thirst had grown almost unendurable. They had grown so weak that every step was an effort. Blindly they stumbled forward at the heels of the never-faltering Maria, and the gleam in her solitary eye seemed to be their only hope. Unwavering, unconquerable, that eye looked out over the desert.

"She'll get there!" muttered Tuck. "She'll get there! Cling to her. She'll save us yet."

They clutched at the ropes that bound Maria's load. They were dazed and numb, and the desert seemed to be swinging round and round them dizzily. Surely they would have fallen soon if it had not been for their hold on the ropes. And even Maria was walking unsteadily now, reeling sometimes as if about to drop in her tracks, and taking every step with painful effort. But the eye glowed like a fiery coal, her spirit still unshaken no matter what tricks her poor old wasted body might be playing her.

So they crawled on, until at last Maria stumbled, and fell to her knees. Her strength was failing fast, and the effort to rise seemed too much for her. Just then Tuck gave a hoarse cry. He had seen the white top of a wagon—Larimer's

wagon at the water hole. Maria's glowing eye caught sight of it, too, and it was a sight that stirred the last bit of her strength.

With a mighty effort she rose to her feet, and gave a dry, rasping bray as she moved on, her thin, shaking legs far apart to steady her, her emaciated body rocking from side to side. Faster she went, swaying, tottering, stumbling, until it seemed every instant that she must fall, for there was no strength left in Maria's bony frame. It was only the invincible spirit that flamed in her lone eye that sustained her and drove her on, and that dragged with her her three companions.

A wild cry rang out from the water hole, and the gaunt figure of a man ran out. So wasted and shrunken he was that he was more like a ghastly specter than a living being.

"Maria!" he cried. "Maria! I knew you'd get here, old gal! I knew you'd save us!"

Faster than ever now Maria went reeling on. And the man, with steps as feeble and unsteady as hers, ran forward to meet her. He threw his shrunken arms around the mule's scrawny neck; and the fire of determination faded out of Maria's eye as she realized she had found Old Zeke at last. Her exhausted body shook until the bones rattled. Suddenly her legs gave way, like broken reeds, and she fell at Old Zeke's feet.

"You're all right, Maria," Old Zeke cried, as

he bent over her. "Don't you worry. You'll pull through—somehow."

But there was a note of fear in the old man's voice, for a film was gathering over Maria's eye, and she did not stir. It took Old Zeke a long time to realize that his old mule had passed on into the happy grazing grounds that surely must have been her reward.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DESERT GHOST

Maria's bones were not left to bleach in the sun, as were those of so many beasts, and of so many men, too, on the Overland Trail. Zeke Yawby dug a grave for her, raised a mound over it to mark the spot, sprinkled it with a few tears, and turned sadly away to continue the march into the West.

Often, as the party moved on, he stopped and looked back at Maria's last resting place until the hills shut it from view. His companions felt sorry for Zeke, but it was not long before, absorbed by their own troubles, they forgot his bereavement. There came far more serious matters to think about than the loss of the old mule. The food supply was running very short again, and even more alarming was the scarcity of water. If they had been able to make as many miles a day as Quantrell and the boys on the relief expedition had covered, their situation would not have been so desperate; but with a woman, two little chil-

dren and two old men in the party it was possible to go not more than half as fast.

Day by day the outlook grew more serious. The water had to be watched and measured out with the utmost care, for every drop was priceless, and even the children were put on half their customary allowance. The entire party began to endure the tortures of thirst, and, while their strength failed with every hour of suffering, their progress became fearfully slow.

Standing on the arid hillside where he and his companions had halted for the night ten days after leaving the water hole, Quantrell gazed west over the desert. The sun was going down behind a jagged range of snow-tipped mountains. A little breeze was beginning to stir the dry, hot air.

Just beyond the mountains lay their goal, California. But for three days they had had scarcely enough food and water to keep them alive. They were only barely alive now, some of them—just enough alive to continue the struggle against the terrible death that broods always over those bare, sun-baked wastes of sand and stone.

Quantrell shrugged his shoulders as he studied the cheerless prospect. He knew that if another day or two should pass without finding water their chances of getting out of the desert alive would be slim indeed. To his own plight he gave scarcely a thought, for in the old, rough days

on the Santa Fe Trail he had become hardened to danger and indifferent to it; he was much more concerned over the fate of the others in the party than over his own, and his eyes were full of trouble as he turned them in the direction of Jim Larimer's wife and two little children. It was Larimer himself, coming up behind Quantrell, who was the first to break the silence.

"How much longer d'you think it's going to take us, Jeff?" he asked anxiously.

"Five days; perhaps a week—if we ever do get out."

"If!" Hoarsely echoing the ominous word, Larimer shot a startled glance at Quantrell and clutched the Santa Fe trailer's sleeve with a trembling hand. "D'you mean it's as bad as that? You think it ain't certain we're going to pull through?" The man's voice was shrill with fear.

Quantrell turned on him contemptuously. "What's the matter with you, Larimer?" he demanded sharply. "Losing your nerve? You didn't count on a certainty of getting through such a country as this, did you? A man that comes on a trail like this has got to have a spine in his back."

Larimer seemed to be making an effort to pull himself together, as if ashamed of having betrayed his timidity. "I'm trying hard not to be

a derned coward, Jeff," he said, his voice now steadier and quieter, "but I'm not alone in the world as you are. I've got a wife and two children with me, and I guess I've got reason for being scared. And all the starving and thirsting we've been through has sort of taken the heart out of me, Jeff. I guess I ain't the man I was."

Quantrell's expression softened. In kindly fashion he laid a hand on Larimer's shoulder. "Yes, I reckon you've got a good excuse for worrying, Jim, if anybody ever had," he said. "You're the only one of us who's got a wife and kids along. But keep your courage with you, old scout. You'll need it. And worry isn't going to help pull your family to the other side of those mountains."

But there was only despair in Larimer's eyes as he stared at the snow-capped wall behind which lay the country whose gold had lured him from his eastern home. "My nerves have sure been getting mighty shaky, Jeff," he said. "I've been seeing things—things that ain't real. I saw a ghost last night."

Apprehensively, with keen, searching eyes, Quantrell studied his companion's haggard face. He was beginning to suspect that the man's mind was giving way under the strain of all that he had endured.

"Oh, I saw it all right," insisted Larimer as he

caught Quantrell's look. "A sure enough ghost it was, Jeff. Off on the desert in the moonlight. Looked like a walking skeleton. It was coming straight toward me, and I was so plumb scared that I put my hands over my face. And when I looked again the thing was gone."

"You need a rest, Jim," said Quantrell. "Go and lie down—and—take a swallow of water, Jim. I reckon we can spare that much."

Larimer shook his head as he turned away. "I'll go and rest," he agreed, "but I won't take a drop more'n my share of the water so long as those kids o' mine are so dry."

Quantrell watched him stroll over to the spot where the remainder of the party were grouped, and reflected dismally that if anything should happen to Larimer he himself would be the only really able-bodied man left. His gaze rested on the weary little group of travelers. Besides the Larimer family there were two old men and two boys. Ezra Bellamy and Zeke Yawby were fairly vigorous considering their old age, but they were too far past the prime of life to be relied on implicitly. Indeed during the past few days both had found the greatest difficulty in keeping pace with the rest of the party. Hollow-eyed, their bodies shrunken to little more than skin and bones, both presented a ghastly appearance. Tuck Simms and Job Danby were bearing up much

better. Quantrell felt that he could count on them to pull through if anybody did. Larimer's wife and children were in the worst plight. Their only food jerked ox meat and with never enough water to satisfy their thirst, they were growing more feeble and wasted with every day. Fortunately there were still two oxen left, and, though these half-starved animals were mere bags of bones, they were able to carry Mrs. Larimer and the children.

Judging from the position of the moon, it must have been long past the middle of the night when Job Danby poked his fist vigorously into the ribs of Tuck Simms. Tuck came out of his sleep with a grunt and sat up. "What's bitin' you?" he demanded, glaring savagely at Job.

Job was staring off over the desert, his eyes full of fear. "Gee, Tuck!" he exclaimed under his breath. "I just saw the ghost that scared Larimer."

Tuck gave a contemptuous snort. "You're dreaming," he growled. "Go to sleep, and don't bother me."

"Look!" cried Job. "There it is now!"

Tuck looked in the direction of Job's pointing, shaking hand, and saw far off on the rocks an emaciated figure of a man standing motionless, the face turned toward them. In the moonlight, which cast a pale, ethereal luster over every ob-

ject, the figure had an unearthly look and its loose clothes hung over it like a shroud.

For a moment Tuck and Job sat staring into each other's eyes dumbfounded. Then they looked again over the desert. The thing was gone.

"Well, the ghost was there all right, wasn't it?" demanded Job.

"Huh! There ain't no such thing," returned Tuck.

"Didn't we see it?"

"Yeah; we saw it all right. But we saw what isn't—that's all."

"I guess I can believe in what I can see with my eyes," Job declared with deep conviction. "Don't ever start arguing with me that there's no such thing as a ghost. I've got chills running clear through me. Wish I was back in old New York. There's no ghosts on Broadway."

"Wish I was back in old Missouri," muttered Tuck, as he dropped off into sleep. "There's plenty of water to drink in old Missouri. Plenty of—water—in—old—" He began to dream of the mill creek where he had fished back home. He was lying over its bank drinking its clear, cold water in great gulps. When at last he awoke he could still hear it babbling; but his throat was drier than ever, and the sun, red and scorching, was creeping up over the gray desert.

As the party were making ready to continue

their journey Tuck and Job told Quantrell how they had seen the ghost. The hard-headed pioneer from the Santa Fe Trail had not the slightest belief in such supernatural visitors; but he was puzzled. Larimer's story he had laid to the hallucinations of a disordered brain, but Tuck and Job, though, like everybody else, they showed the effects of hunger and thirst, seemed perfectly rational.

"I'll have to get a pretty plain look at a ghost myself before I'll believe in 'em," he said with a grim smile. "Folks that are thirsting and starving are likely to see pretty near anything, I reckon."

All that day they struggled on toward the jagged mountain range, while their water supply grew smaller and smaller. When again they halted for the night and each had gulped down the evening share—scarcely more than a swallow—there was only enough left to fill a single powder can. The can was carefully corked and placed in a cool hole in a ledge of rocks. It held enough, perhaps, to see them all through another day, but not enough to keep them from suffering for even that short time.

In the morning Quantrell found it half empty. Without a word of comment he showed it to the men and the boys. His mouth was set in hard, grim lines as he studied the face of each one,

and there was a hard, steely glitter in his eyes.

A long, dismal silence followed. At last old Ezra Bellamy spoke. "Some one of us here is a thief," he said hoarsely, "and hangin' would be too good for him."

Larimer looked up at the glaring sun. "Half a can!" he cried. "How'll we ever get through this day with half a can!" He glanced at his wife and children, and tears came to his eyes. "You're right, Bellamy. Hangin' would be too good for whoever stole that water. He's the meanest thief that ever lived."

"Well, it'll do no good standin' here and talkin' about it," put in Zeke Yawby. "We better get ready to move. The more miles we cover the more likely we'll be to find a water hole. And if we don't find one pretty quick we'd better all say our prayers."

Tuck watched Yawby closely. The old man was the newest member of the party, and nobody knew anything about him. He was the only one in the group whom Tuck would have been willing to suspect for a moment of stealing the water. If Yawby wasn't the thief, then one of the others must be; and that seemed impossible. Would Jeff Quantrell ever stoop to such a despicable deed; or would Bellamy, or Job, or Larimer? Never! Tuck felt ashamed of the mere thought. As for Mrs. Larimer and her children, they had

not known where the can was. They had also been receiving a larger allowance of water than the others of the party, and surely would not have been desperate enough to try to find it, with the risk of being caught in the theft. No, this had been a man's job. Mrs. Larimer in her weakened condition could not possibly have climbed down the ledge to the hole where the can had been stored for the night, and her children were scarcely more than babies.

So that left Yawby as the only one who could be guilty, according to Tuck's reasoning. And yet old Zeke had a frank, honest face, and had borne up bravely and without a word of grumbling under all the suffering he had shared with his companions. Tuck found it hard to suspect him.

Suddenly he realized that Quantrell's sharp, searching eyes were also fastened on old Zeke. Tuck knew what Quantrell would do if the thief were discovered. Quantrell would shoot him.

The old man seemed to sense the fact that he was the object of suspicion, though not a word had been spoken against him. An angry glitter came into his little, deep-set eyes as from under shaggy, gray eyebrows they read the thought that was in the mind of every one he saw. For a moment he glowered at his silent accusers, then turned away with a sneer.

"It's him," whispered Bellamy.

Larimer nodded. "It begins to look that way," he admitted. "Who else could it be? Nobody. But we don't know yet, and we got to be sure before we do anything."

"And we've got other things to think about just now," Quantrell added. "There's a fierce day ahead of us. We better be moving."

With every minute the air was growing hotter and hotter. The sun hung in an absolutely cloudless sky. Dry hills, towering rocks and wide wastes of sand shimmered in the yellow glare. The desert seemed to be beckoning to them to come and meet their fate.

Tuck Simms had kept his courage up until now, but as he looked into the west a terrible fear took hold of him, and he could feel himself trembling.

"Half a can of water," he muttered. "Not enough for even one of us. How'll we get through this day?"

Already they were suffering from thirst, but they did not dare touch a drop of the precious water. Even the children's share was withheld from them. It was not until they had traveled several miles that each of the party was allowed a few drops. They ate none of the jerked meat that day. Their throats were too dry to swallow it. Instead they pulled up the few blades of grass they passed, and sucked ravenously at the roots for the moisture. Their strength was ebbing

fast; yet somehow they struggled on and on mile after mile. Once, on a rocky hillside, they came upon a human skeleton, the only sign that they were not the only travelers who had ever ventured into that lifeless country.

About the middle of the day they stopped to rest.

"We can't hold out any longer like this," Larimer moaned. "We got to have some of the water."

Quantrell took the can, and carefully measured out half its contents. The children and their mother were the first to be served, and Zeke Yawby was the last. There was a feverish light in the old man's eyes as he raised his cup to his swollen lips.

As he was about to gulp down the water a sound came to his ears that caused him to hesitate. Larimer's children were begging and sobbing for more—for just a few more drops.

Old Zeke turned and stared at them. Then he looked longingly at the water in his cup and rubbed his parched tongue against his cracking lips. He looked out over the hopeless, shimmering miles of desert that lay between him and his goal, and his eyes turned again to the children. He stood blinking at them, swaying dizzily, while the cup shook dangerously in his feeble, unsteady hands. The children were watching him with

yearning eyes. At last he stepped over to them.

"It's yours," he whispered thickly, and he gave them each a swallow. Not a drop remained for himself, and, hanging the empty cup on his belt, he limped away with his grim, worn face turned stubbornly to the west.

"He's guilty!" cried Larimer, who was now half-crazed from all that he had endured. "Don't that prove it? Would he be giving water away if he hadn't had a derned sight more'n his share?"

Ezra Bellamy shook his head in perplexity. "It sure proves one thing or another," he said. "It proves he's either the meanest thief on earth or a better man than any of us."

"He's the thief!" cried Larimer furiously. "I'm going to kill him. He ain't fit to live." He raised his gun and pointed it at Yawby, who was watching him with a look of contempt in his tired eyes. Old Zeke seemed to be indifferent to his fate.

In the nick of time Quantrell interfered by jerking the gun from Larimer's hands. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about that water, Jim," he said, "and something tells me we're going to find out who's the thief. You wait a while. There's not going to be any shooting yet."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGHT ON THE HILL-TOP

Before sunset the last drop in the can was gone, and when they halted, exhausted and desperate, for the night it seemed to every one of them that they were face to face with death. They knew there was no hope of getting through another day without water. They would go mad with thirst before another sunset and would die in agony.

Larimer began to whimper like a child. "My poor little kids!" he wailed. "My poor little kids! We haven't got a chance—not a chance!" He could hear the children moaning, and crying feebly for water.

"You shut up!" snapped Quantrell, who looked years older than when they had set out on that torturing day's march and who was beginning to lose his cool self control. "This is no time for making a fool of yourself. We're not going to stay here and die without an effort to save ourselves, and you're wrong about not

having a chance. We're getting up into the higher hills now, and along about midnight it gets to be freezing up near the top of 'em. If any moisture falls up there it will be left in sheets of ice, and if there's ice we'll have to find it before the sun comes up to melt it. We'll rest a while, and then we'll begin to hunt."

"And if there isn't any ice we'll get ready to die," moaned Larimer, who no longer found it possible to muster any courage. He was too nervous and troubled to sleep, and, instead of lying down with the others, he paced restlessly to and fro hour after hour, until the moon had climbed high and Quantrell crept from his blankets and woke his sleeping companions.

"Take your guns with you," he ordered. "We're going to separate now and climb up into the hills looking for that ice. If any of you find it he's to fire his gun as a signal. If you don't find more than enough for yourself don't fire, for we don't want to do any roaming round for nothing."

"And if I happen to make a real big find I'll fire twice," said Bellamy.

"Yes, if you do that fire twice," Quantrell assented. "Good news like that couldn't come to us too soon. That's the plan we'll all follow; one shot if there's enough to go round, two if its a big strike. And keep to the rocks. You won't

find any ice where there's soil for water to seep through."

Without waking Mrs. Larimer or the children, who, it seemed, needed no one to guard them in that spot where no living visitors, men nor beasts, could be expected, they set off into the hills that lay close to the west, each taking a different direction, their routes spreading out from the starting point like the ribs of a fan. It was very slowly they moved, for they had but little strength left and it was rough, steep ground they were crossing.

Tuck Simms, as he plodded painfully on, soon lost sight of others. His heart sank as he found himself alone in the silent night in that land where death seemed to be waiting and beckoning for him. He shivered; but not from the sharp air of the night; it was fear that was sending chills through his veins. With his fellow travelers beside him it had been easier for him to keep his courage. But now, alone, where not a sound broke through the death-like silence, he had never been so timid and miserable. He began to realize more keenly than ever the peril of their situation. If he should find no ice and should hear no gunshots he would be convinced that only a miracle could save them.

He climbed up and up the steep slope, until there was no longer sandy soil but solid rock

under his feet. He was so weak that every step was a hard effort. His throat burned; his dry tongue felt as if a piece of thick cloth had been wedged into his mouth. Thirst, hunger and exhaustion had brought on a dizziness, and the hills seemed to be reeling round him. His fevered imagination was beginning to play tricks with him. Once he was sure he heard the moan of a human being. It was only the wind. Then a shadow cast in the moonlight by a slender pinnacle of rock startled him and brought to his mind the ghost that had frightened Larimer and that Job and he himself had seen on the following night. The thought of the ghost filled him with a new fear. If he should meet that apparition now he would surely give himself up for lost. His nerves were in no condition for such a shock.

Little clouds, mere shreds of some far-distant forms, were drifting over the hilltops, and they gave Tuck a glimmer of hope. They looked as if they might be dropping water here and there. Suddenly the moon shone out between them, and disclosed a sight that thrilled him. A few steps away a tiny sheet of ice glittered like silver.

Tuck broke into a run. The precious ice, which he would not have exchanged for its bulk in diamonds at that moment, was almost within his grasp, when the ghastly thing that had been

in his thoughts appeared before him. It was the ghost—the same ghost that he and Job had seen.

Tuck stood stock-still, paralyzed by terror. And for a moment the specter was as still as he. It was a skeleton, draped with rags—rags which in the dim moonlight were like a shroud.

Then the thing moved—moved toward him. And as it came it gave a hoarse cry that brought Tuck to his senses. It was a living human being —a man emaciated to little more than skin and bones and whose loose clothes were mere shreds and tatters.

The fierce, menacing glare in the man's eyes as he staggered forward put Tuck on his guard. The suspicion flashed into his mind that it was a maniac rather than a ghost that confronted him at this moment.

The next moment the man sprang at him savagely, gripping him with hands that were like claws. They struggled to and fro, grasping for breath, tearing at each other desperately. A few days earlier Tuck would have found it an easy matter to beat off such a forlorn, feeble creature, who was weaker than a child, but thirst and hunger had left him in almost as bad a plight as the wreck of a man who was attacking him.

Suddenly came a flash of steel. The man had drawn a knife from his belt. In the nick of time Tuck caught sight of the weapon. Mustering

all his failing strength, he gripped the bony hand that held it. Desperately he clung to that skeleton claw—clung to it until he had thrown his last bit of strength into the effort and he felt himself fainting.

He slipped, fell, but his grip still held on the hand that clutched the knife. The man was falling with him. As they came down together on the rocks the knife slipped from its owner's grasp and went spinning out of sight far below them.

Tuck lay half stunned, too weak to rise, but he saw a ragged form lying beside him and felt sure that the famished wreck must be as helpless as he himself. It had been a short and feeble struggle, but the strain had been too great for such poor, weakened bodies.

To Tuck's dizzy brain the moon seemed to be swinging to and fro like a round Chinese lantern blown by the wind. The hills and far-away mountains were bumping together in a terrific, earth-rocking combat. He imagined that he could see all the long trail, stretching across the continent, over which the caravans of the emigrants were crawling on their way to the land of gold. Sometimes he saw men falling from hunger and thirst, others lying dead with Indian arrows in their bodies. And sometimes men were locked together in death struggles, because of the lust

for gold. It was only a dream of his fevered brain, yet all that he thought he saw was taking place, even that very night in that strange, delirious year of 1849.

Tuck came to his senses with a start. An icy wind was blowing over him and he was shivering. He staggered up and stared around stupidly. The poor creature with whom he had fought was glaring up at him helplessly.

A silvery sheen caught Tuck's attention. It was the moonlight on the little sheet of ice, a thin patch on the rock that he could almost have covered with his two hands. In a frenzy of eagerness he knelt beside it, cracking it with his knuckles and dropping little slivers of it into his parched mouth. It was a pitiful supply for such a raging thirst as his, but it would at least moisten his burning throat.

A deep moan from behind him caused him to turn. The prostrate man was watching him with eyes that blazed with suffering and yearning. Tuck hesitated, his hands clutching at what remained of the ice. Half of it he had already gulped down, but his thirst was as maddening as before. Yet the look in those hollow eyes held him spellbound.

"It's yours, partner," he cried out at last. "You and me are in the same fix, I reckon, and I've had my share."

The man stretched out his hands wildly, and began to whimper as he sucked at the ice. When the last sliver of it had disappeared he gave a gasp of relief, and turned his eyes gratefully toward Tuck.

"It wa'n't much," he muttered, "but enough to save me—enough to drive the fog out of my brain. But I didn't deserve it from you, youngster. It was me that took your water last night."

"You!" cried Tuck with a start. "You did that? It's no ice I'd have given you if I'd known. You ought to be killed—a thief as mean as you."

The man's lips quivered. He choked down a sob. "I guess I'm a thief sure enough," he said weakly. "But I dunno as I'm such a mean one. I didn't drink none o' that water—not a drop. It wa'n't for myself that I took it."

Tuck stared at him in bewilderment. "Then—why——"

From down the slope came a cry. The man raised himself to his knees and gave a hoarse shout in answer. The cry came again, and this time the words were unmistakable—"Daddy! Daddy!" A moment, and a little, curly-haired boy came running toward them.

"There's the reason," said the man, turning to Tuck. "I've starved and thirsted and stole for that little kid o' mine. We're all that's left of a party of eight—me and him. His poor

mother lies back on the desert somewheres. And I'd be lyin' there myself if it wa'n't for him. I swore I'd pull him through—through to Californy alive—and that's what's kept me agoin' when I could have laid down and died a heap sight easier."

He staggered up with an oath. "And I'll pull him through yet—that little kid o' mine!" he cried, as he held out his shrunken arms to the little boy.

At that moment the report of a gun resounded through the hills—then another.

A wild shout from Tuck joined the echoes of the shots. "We'll all pull through!" he cried. "That's what that gun means! It means we're saved!"

CHAPTER XV

SANDOVAL'S TREASURE

QUANTRELL had fired the signal. He had found only a thin layer of ice, but it covered a pool of clear water two feet deep—enough to quench the burning thirst of all and to give them a supply for two or three days besides.

After this good fortune they were in a mood to give a friendly welcome to the man whom Tuck had discovered and his little son, though a few minutes earlier they would have been dismayed by the prospect of having two more mouths to supply with food and drink. The stranger, who gave his name as Seth Cullock and explained that he had been one of a party of Pennsylvanians on the way to the gold fields, was grateful for their ready acceptance of him and his boy as companions on the journey, and eagerly did his share in the continual search for water. It was he who discovered a little blackish pool the following day which added several quarts to their supply.

"It sure looks now as if we'd get through all right," Quantrell declared.

And so it proved, for in less than a week they had crossed the last waterless waste, the Mojave Desert, and had come out into green pasture land. At the adobe house of a Mexican farmer they were supplied with an abundance of food and water.

They came at last into Los Angeles, a little boom town at that time, where Seth Cullock found friends who were glad to give shelter to him and his little boy. Larimer and his family made camp on the edge of the town, while Quantrell, Bellamy, Tuck and Job found lodging at the Bella Union Hotel, where Quantrell insisted on paying the bills of the boys. It was in that ramshackle hostelry, which, in spite of its forbidding aspect, enjoyed an enviable reputation in those days, that they fell in with Don Pablo Sandoval.

It was on a November evening in 1849 that Don Pablo was sitting in a corner of the office of the Bella Union gazing dreamily at the fly-specked ceiling and at the sputtering oil lamps that hung from it.

A distinguished-looking old fellow was the Don—tall and thin, his thick, wavy hair and long, pointed beard snow white, heavy eyebrows as black as coal, nose shaped like the beak of

a parrot—altogether a haughty, domineering aspect. At that moment, however, there was a wandering look in his eyes which showed that his thoughts were very far away from the fly-specked ceiling—much too far to take note of the fact that he had attracted the attention of Cherokee Williams, who had just entered the room.

Cherokee Williams was as wild and reckless a desperado as could be found in Los Angeles, even in those roaring days when the booming City of the Angels was full of such fire-eating characters. He was a man whom it was well for peaceable citizens to avoid, for he was inclined to sudden and violent prejudices and to bringing his gun into play on very slight provocation.

"Where in thunder did you come from, anyhow?" roared Cherokee, stepping close to Don Pablo and leering at him.

The Don came out of his dreams with a start,

"I don't like your looks," Cherokee persisted belligerently. "You got too highfalutin' an air about you to suit me, and if you know what's good for you you'll vamose out of here quick. Do you hear me?"

Don Pablo got out of his chair, and drew himself up to his full six feet. His face flushed, his eyes blazed. "You have insulted me, sir," he said.

"Insulted you, eh?" shouted Cherokee. "Well,

that's in my line of business. And now you just listen to me, you proud, struttin' old turkey-cock. There ain't enough room here for you and me, and you're goin'. Git!"

The Don winced as he discovered the muzzle of a pistol six inches from his nose. But he stood as firm as a rock.

"I'll give you till I count three," said Cherokee, "and if you're not goin' you'd sure better be sayin' your prayers."

Don Pablo was as brave as he was proud. He would let no border ruffian bully him—not even if it meant he must die. He folded his arms, and gazed into the man's face with withering contempt.

It was a new experience for Cherokee Williams, to find his threats met with such complacent scorn, and it roused him to fury. "One!" he bellowed hoarsely. "I'm countin', you derned old fool! Two——"

Don Pablo moved not a muscle. Cherokee was hissing out "Three!" when the butt of a rifle was swung sharply against his right arm. With a cry of pain, he swung about, his pistol dropping from his paralyzed hand. He found himself looking at the dangerous end of Tuck Simm's gun—the same gun that had knocked the pistol from his grasp. It was also the same gun that had shot Indians on the plains and that had been

Tuck's ally through many an adventure on the boy's long journey westward across prairies and desert.

Although Tuck Simms was by that time a man in everything but years, he had had a good deal more experience with hardship and danger than most men, even than most men in that wild country of hardy pioneers. Back in Missouri a few months earlier he would never have dreamed of matching himself against such a man as Cherokee Williams. Since then he had been through ordeals that had hardened him to meet situations that most men would have shrunk from.

"I reckon you're the one that's goin' to get out of here," Tuck said coolly. "You're goin' to get out quick, and you're goin' to leave that shootin' iron of yours behind. Now get a move on, or I'll sure shoot daylight clean through your ornery carcass."

For a moment Cherokee stood hesitating; then, with an oath, turned and left the room.

With outstretched hands, Don Pablo stepped forward, his face beaming with gratitude.

"Young man, you have saved my life!" he exclaimed, grasping Tuck's hands and shaking them vigorously. "You will not regret it. Don Pablo Sandoval is not the man to forget such a good turn as this."

"It made me madder'n a wet hen to see an old man like you treated that way," said Tuck. "I'm kind of sorry now I didn't make the measly cur apologize. He got off too easy."

The Don pulled thoughtfully at his beard while he studied Tuck's face. "You're the young man who came in with the party from the desert yesterday," he said at last. "I have heard much about you and your companions and of the terrible experiences you have come through. You are a youth after my own heart—such a one as I have been looking for. I feel instinctively that you are a young man whom I could trust implicitly."

Don Pablo glanced furtively about the room.

"This is a bad place for confidences," he said under his breath. "Come with me. I have something of the utmost importance to speak of."

He led the way through a rear door and across an enclosure to a one-story annex which contained the hotel's bedrooms. The old man's room was small and cheerless, and the floor was the bare earth, but it was as good as any that the establishment could offer, in spite of the fact that the Bella Union boasted of being the finest hotel south of San Francisco. The Don drew out a three-legged stool for Tuck, while he himself sat on the narrow bed.

"My young friend," he began, "it is within my

power to offer you an opportunity of becoming suddenly wealthy."

Tuck Simms's mouth dropped wide open and he turned a bewildered stare upon the dignified old gentleman. A good many surprising things had come into Tuck's life during the past few months, but nothing quite so astonishing as this. "You're—you're not joking, are you?" he stammered.

"I never joke," replied Don Pablo stiffly. "I am under great obligations to you, and I need some one whom I can trust implicitly. You impress me as being thoroughly reliable in that respect."

It was obvious that the Don was in sober earnest, yet Tuck found it hard to believe that the road to riches was opening for himself so easily. "It sure sounds pretty good," he said, "and I could stand having some more money. Three dollars and fifty cents is all I've got in the world just now."

A breath of wind rustled some paper on a little writing table and attracted the Don's attention to the fact that the door was ajar. He got up and closed it. "I have reason to fear that I am being spied upon," he explained. "Possibly I have been so foolish as to drop a hint here and there that I am on the track of a fortune. At any rate, two particularly undesirable-looking Mexi-

cans have been showing a suspicious interest in my movements of late. It is going to be necessary for me to go on a most important journey into the mountains, and I shall need to be well protected against attack. It might be well for me to take not only you but your friends with me. I could make it well worth their while. Your friends are all trustworthy? Can we rely on them?"

"You bet we can," declared Tuck. "Jeff Quantrell's a famous man back on the Santa Fe Trail, and he and old Ezra Bellamy and Job Danby are as true as steel."

Don Pablo stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Suppose you bring them here," he said. "The sooner a decision is made the better."

"They're in the hotel now," said Tuck. "Wait a minute and I'll get 'em."

Don Pablo held out a restraining hand as Tuck turned to the door. "Be cautious, young man," he warned. "Say nothing to them within the hearing of others."

When Tuck returned, Quantrell, Bellamy and Job were with him.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said the Don, bowing low. "I regret that there is only one stool and the bed—hardly seats for us all. But I shall stand up. I can express myself better on my feet."

Again he took the precaution to see that the door was closed tightly. "Perhaps you have already heard," he began, "how my young friend here saved my life a few moments ago. I am under obligations to him that I shall soon be ready to repay handsomely. In fact, if all goes well, he is likely to be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams, and if you are all willing to go with me on an expedition into the mountains I will see that none of you will have reason to regret it."

Quantrell looked puzzled. "Sounds kind of vague," he said, as he scrutinized the old man's face sharply. "What's this expedition for—gold?"

The Don shook his head. "Better than that," he answered. "Have you heard the talk that there are diamonds in California?"

Quantrell gave an almost imperceptible start. He had heard such rumors; indeed they could be heard at almost any place where men came together to gossip. "So far as I know, nobody's found any yet," he said. "But they may. There's no telling. These are strange times."

Don Pablo's dark eyes glittered with excitement. "I know where they are to be found," he announced, his voice trembling a little. "I hold the clew to untold wealth. Even the fabulous treasure in the grotto on Monte Cristo's island will seem insignificant compared with what I

shall be able to show you. Follow me, gentlemen, and your most fantastic dreams shall be realized, the dreams for which you have journeyed thousands of miles and have endured all the tortures of the desert. Will you come?"

Old Bellamy hopped from his perch on the bed, his wrinkled face beaming with enthusiasm, and grasped the Don's hands. "You betcher life we'll come!" he cried. "I'd follow you clear round the world and back again if I thought I was going to find diamonds."

Quantrell seemed to fail to share Bellamy's enthusiasm. Crouched on the stool, he stroked his chin and regarded the Don doubtfully. Much experience with the ways of the world had made him slow to place much faith in strangers. "What kind of evidence have you got?" he asked at last.

"Evidence?" cried Don Pablo. "Evidence? Why, gentlemen, my word should be enough. I am not ready to disclose all that I know—not yet. You will have to have faith in me—faith. Faith can move mountains. There is nothing like it."

Just a suspicion of a smile flickered over Quantrell's face. "Yep, that may be," he assented. "But it can get a man into a peck of trouble sometimes, too. However, our time's our own just now, and I reckon we're all willing to take a chance. Sounds too good to be true, but it's easy

to believe almost anything nowadays with this gold fever sweeping over the country and turning folks giddy. A year ago I thought men that said there was gold in California were dreaming."

"Ah!" exclaimed Don Pablo, looking as wise as a patriarch of old. "That's the way of the world. Every big discovery is only a dream at first. Men dream of airships, and we'll get them some day, though people would think me crazy for saying so. No doubt the first man to find gold in California was supposed to be a lunatic until he showed his evidence. The world is altogether too skeptical. You must have faith, my friends, faith."

It developed that Don Pablo's objective was a three-days' journey to the north into the mountains, and that he was ready to set out the very next day. He knew where he could buy a string of mules at once, and laying in supplies would be a simple matter.

In fact, the following morning the Don began his preparations so promptly and with so much energy that by noon the party was ready to start. Everything had been attended to with business-like thoroughness. Two extra mules had even been provided to carry the packs.

"I'm not any too sure the old boy's going to lead us to anything," Quantrell said to Tuck, as they rode away through the town, with the Don's

majestic figure in the lead. "But shucks! What's the difference? It'll be only six days lost if we don't find even a speck of a diamond."

"We're going to find something all right," declared Tuck with firm conviction. "That old man knows what he's talking about. Never met such a swell talker as he is. A feller that can use language like that must have brains enough not to be fooled. What he said about having faith made a big hit with me."

"Me, too," put in Job, who had drawn his mule close to Tuck's. "I couldn't sleep all night from thinking about diamonds. I'll bet we'll open our eyes pretty wide when we get to the spot we're aimin' for."

Old Bellamy, riding close behind them, managed to catch the drift of what had been said. "There ain't a doubt of it," he called out. "Nobody can tell me that that Don What's-his-name ain't goin' to produce the goods. He's no ordinary man, that feller. What he don't know wouldn't fill many books, if I'm not mistaken. I'm goin' to have a diamond ring on every finger when I go back to old Missouri."

Tuck had already resolved to build a fine little house overlooking the Golden Gate and to bring his mother there. His plans for the future were fairly modest at first. But they began to expand as Don Pablo, here and there along the way,

dropped further hints as to the size of the fortune that awaited them. When, just after making camp on the first night, the Don spoke of the treasure as being worth more than any gold mine in the State, Tuck decided that his house would be about twice the size of his original plan.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WORLD DAZZLER

They were high in the mountains when they made camp on the second night. Far below them a river roared through a narrow gorge. Many miles away against the horizon the Mojave Desert shone like polished silver. A brand-new moon hung over the Pacific Ocean, the thin crescent turning from white to gold as the night deepened. It was a night for dreams, for romance, a night for extravagant imaginations to run riot. On such a night fairies might dance in the forests and witches ride on broomsticks. On such a night almost any fantastic thing could be believed.

Standing alone, framed against the sky, Don Pablo, his tall, thin figure wrapped in a long, loose black coat, his white hair and beard waving in the wind, looked unearthly. Slowly he drew near the spot where his companions had grouped themselves. As he joined them he pulled out from under his coat a huge book.

"I am ready now," he said, "to make to you an almost incredible disclosure. I shall begin with this book, which was written by my remote ancestor, who was chief jeweler to King Solomon the Great."

"What!" cried old Bellamy. "You don't mean that book was written when Solomon was king!"

Don Pablo bowed his head. "What it contains was certainly written at that time," he answered. "It has been renewed by one of the chief jeweler's descendants every two hundred years, and this book was copied from the one that preceded it by my great great grandfather one hundred and eighty-three years ago."

Quantrell reached for the volume. It was printed in strange characters that were entirely beyond his understanding. "It certainly looks its age," he admitted.

"My remote ancestor," Don Pablo continued, "went on one of the great king's expeditions to the Land of Ophir in search of gold. You perhaps know that the location of Ophir has been one of the great problems of history. Some have contended that it was in Africa, others that it was in the West Indies or Mexico. It was certainly very far away from Jerusalem, for the Bible tells us that it took King Solomon's ships many months to make the journey. I am able to prove

by this book I now hold that Ophir was the very land we are in to-night."

Old Bellamy gave a loud gasp. Tuck and Job stared blankly at each other. Quantrell looked hard at Don Pablo.

"My remote ancestor," the Don went on, "was the leader of a separate division of the expedition, and it was his duty to search for precious stones. The ships of the gold and jewel seekers entered the Golden Gate, and established a city for the base of supplies at the most convenient site on the bay. The description of the bay in this book is perfect; in fact the book gives a better and more detailed description of the general topography of what is now California than anything that has been written in modern times. The seekers for gold and jewels spread out through the mountains, and in this book is described every gorge and river bed where the jewel division made their search. Meeting with no success, they left the gold seekers far behind and came at last to the part of the country that we are in at present. Here they found diamonds in abundance, and it was the largest of these stones that I am now about to bring back to Los Angeles. This is a jewel which weighs two hundred pounds."

"Jee-rusalem!" roared Bellamy, gaping up at

the Don incredulously. "Did—did you say two hundred pounds?"

"Two hundred pounds," repeated Don Pablo. "A stone that will dazzle the world.

"Gosh! Two hundred pounds! It sure will be a world dazzler!" Bellamy looked as dazed as if the jewel were already sparkling before his eyes.

"My remote ancestor," the Don continued, "decided to appropriate this priceless gem to himself as an official perquisite, and he hid it on top of a great mound of granite on the margin of a deep lake, then retraced his steps to the coast, intending to return with a few trusted servants and secretly remove the great treasure. Arriving at the base of supplies on the bay, my ancestor found that the expedition had been ordered to return to Jerusalem at once. That was the last expedition that was ever made to Ophir, and my ancestor, having lost the chance of ever possessing the great diamond, set himself to describing the place where it is now concealed. This book is the result of his labors. I was taught to read this book, which is printed in now world-forgotten characters. While I was lapidary to the King of Spain I read of the discovering of gold in this remote land, and, becoming more and more interested, I obtained a copy of Fremont's 'Explorations.' The reading of it led me to think that this

land might be Ophir. I compared the two books, and became convinced that the secret of the great diamond was at last laid bare. Then I lost no time in coming to this country. And here we are to-night, on the very verge of discovering the greatest treasure the world has ever known."

A feverish light burned in the old man's eyes, and his whole body shook with excitement. An unearthly silence fell.

"That house of mine," mused Tuck, "will be built of marble, and the doors will have gold knobs."

Quantrell was the first to break the death-like stillness. "That is sure a strange story, Don," he said, "but I'll have to see to believe."

"I'm convinced all right," declared Bellamy. "What more evidence do you want than that there book? Have faith, Jeff. As the Don told us, faith can move mountains."

"That is the proper spirit," said Don Pablo gratefully. "For your confidence in me you deserve a great reward, and you shall have it."

Bellamy stared up at the stars, and saw visions of a glorious future. Indeed Don Pablo's amazing story and his magnetic personality, combined with the witchery of the night in those lonely mountain tops, seemed to have cast an hypnotic spell over them all. Even practical, hard-headed Quantrell showed signs of being affected by it.

Long after they had rolled themselves in their blankets the thought of the two-hundred-pound diamond kept them wide awake, and Ezra Bellamy scarcely slept a wink all night.

When at last Tuck Simms sat up, rubbed his eyes and blinked at the sunrise he wondered whether he had dreamed that strange tale about King Solomon's chief jeweler and the world-dazzling jewel. In the cold light of day the spell that Don Pablo had thrown over him in the dark was beginning to lose its hold. It was a good deal harder to believe now that this land was Ophir and that its greatest treasures was almost within their grasp.

But, suddenly recalling the Don's eloquent words on the subject of Faith, he refused to entertain the doubts that were trying to creep into his mind.

The daylight seemed to have cooled the enthusiasm of the others somewhat, too—of all except Don Pablo. He was growing more and more excited with every hour.

All that day and the next they picked their way through the wild, lonely range. According to the Don's figuring, the time when they should have come to their journey's end was long passed. Their hopes were fading fast; even old Bellamy was beginning to doubt.

"The more the Don talks," grumbled Quan-

trell, "the more I'm convinced that there's nothing in that story of his."

"But there's that book," Tuck protested. "That can't be wrong."

Quantrell gave a grunt. "Son, do you know what I think is the trouble?" he said. "Don Pablo is crazy."

"Crazy!" echoed Tuck. "Gee! I hadn't thought of that. But if that's so he's sure a mighty clever lunatic. I'm not going to give up hoping—not yet."

When they halted for the night at the entrance to a deep ravine Quantrell called Don Pablo's attention to the fact that they had already gone many miles farther than he had reckoned.

"But we are almost there," returned the Don.

"That's what you said last night," Quantrell reminded him.

Don Pablo drew himself up stiffly, and surveyed his companions. "I am beginning to suspect, gentlemen, that you are losing faith," he said. "On such a quest as this stout hearts are needed and faith that never falters. Before another day has passed you will behold a treasure that will enable me to buy the Holy City from the Infidels and rebuild King Solomon's temple. I shall make myself King of the Jews, and I can assure you that you will all have high offices in the kingdom. In Spain I have a beautiful daughter, who will

inherit the throne, and I have been considering the advisability of betrothing her to Tuck Simms, who, in that event, would share with her the royal power and would eventually become King of the Jews himself—that is if his faith holds out long enough on this journey."

Tuck gasped. He had a pretty good imagination and had done a lot of dreaming in his short life time, but he had never reached such heights as this. It had been hard enough to swallow the tale of the two-hundred-pound diamond, but the Don was now demanding too much for the firmest faith to stand. Tuck positively refused to believe that either Don Pablo or he himself was destined to become King of Jerusalem.

"I reckon I've had about enough," said Quantrell gloomily. "In the morning I turn back to Los Angeles."

He glanced at his friends, and it was apparent that the last bit of their enthusiasm for the Don's enterprise had oozed out of them. He knew that each one of them was now as thoroughly convinced as he himself that Don Pablo was a raving lunatic. Even old Ezra could take no stock in the Don's latest announcement.

"You'll either have to turn back with us or go on alone, Don," came Quantrell's ultimatum.

"Then I shall certainly continue my way alone," replied Don Pablo grimly. "Moreover,

I shall continue my way at once, for the diamond lies only at the other end of this ravine. I am deserted when almost at the goal of my dreams."

But he had lost his influence over the minds of his companions. Silver-tongued oratory no longer had the slightest charm for them. If the diamond was at the other end of the ravine they would have to have more proof than mere words. Sullenly they sat watching him as he saddled his mule and rode away down the ravine, leading one of the pack mules behind him.

"Crazy—by—gosh!" exclaimed old Ezra, drawling the words out slowly. "Crazy as a loon! Makes me pretty hot to think we've come way up here for nothin'. And I'd have follered him fer a month if he hadn't sprung that business about makin' himself King of Jerusalem. I may be able to swaller a good deal, but, by gum, not that!"

At last, after a dismal hour or more had gone by, Tuck got up to go for his blankets. He was growing sleepy, and the night had brought a chill into the air. As he rose to his feet a movement in the trees at the other side of the ravine attracted his attention. After a moment he caught sight of the two men on horseback working their way slowly along the pass with very evident pains to conceal themselves from observation. He pointed them out to Quantrell. It was a place

where one could scarcely have expected to discover human beings, and Quantrell was puzzled.

"They've sure seen us and want to keep away from us," he said, "or they wouldn't be going to so much trouble to steer clear of the easiest trail. But I can't make out what could bring them to a place like this, or why they want to hide."

Suddenly Tuck thought of the Don's remark that two Mexicans, who, he feared had learned something of his secret, had been spying on him. Quantrell, after Tuck had told him of the old man's suspicions, made up his mind at once that the men in the trees were the Mexicans the Don had feared.

"The old boy's probably been spreading his secret about pretty freely," he said, "and those two varmints have heard of it. It looks to me as if they were out for trouble, and we'd better follow along."

He hurried after his mule, and Tuck, Job and Bellamy were soon ready to join him in following the Don's trail through the ravine.

They had ridden scarcely two miles when, from the distance, they heard a shot, followed quickly by two more. Quantrell swung his lash sharply across the haunches of his mule, driving the animal forward at full speed, followed closely by the others. Another shot sounded, then, after a

long interval, another. A few minutes later they heard close ahead the beating of hooves. Presently Don Pablo appeared, riding furiously toward them and followed by the pack mule. At the same moment Tuck and Quantrell raised their guns and fired at two men who were in hot pursuit. At the sound of the shots the men turned and made good their retreat.

"They got me!" cried Don Pablo, as his mule came to a stop beside the others. "I'm done for!" He was reeling in the saddle, and the front of his shirt was stained with blood. He fell into the arms of Quantrell, who laid him gently on the soft earth.

"You thought me crazy," gasped the old man. "I don't blame you, and I forgive you. The diamond is on the pack mule. It belongs to all of you. The book I give to Bellamy."

Old Bellamy rushed to the mule, and pulled from its back some great heavy mass wrapped in a blanket. As he frantically pulled off the covering he gave a wild cry. "The diamond!" At his feet it shone in the starlight with an unearthly splendor.

* * * * * * *

An hour after Don Pablo Sandoval had gone to join his remote ancestor, the chief jeweler to King Solomon, and a long line of others who were

in their graves, Quantrell said, "I happen to know a good deal about crystallized quartz, and that's just what this diamond is—the biggest piece I ever saw. And as for that book of yours, Ezra, seems to me I've seen something like that before, too. Ah! I remember now. It's a Hindostanee surveyor's manual."

"Faith! Faith!" muttered Bellamy disgustedly as he sat gazing savagely at the book. "Faith can move mountains. Yeah."

"Oh, faith's all right, Uncle," said Quantrell with a grim smile. "Only everything depends on where you happen to place it."

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE GOLD CAMP

With most of the population of Hangtown everything depended on luck. It didn't matter much how clever a man was or how much he knew. Prosperity was as likely to come to the stupid and ignorant as to the intelligent and educated. It was all luck.

It was just the right place for such a man as Old Kentuck. All his life he had depended on luck. Some men used their brains to get on in the world; Old Kentuck just waited for good fortune to come his way, and a little of it came—sometimes. When it didn't he managed to worry along somehow, with a hopeful eye to the future, which, experience told him, was always sure to have something in store for him, though it might be very long in coming and disappointingly small.

"No, son," he said to Tuck Simms one Spring day in 1850, "brains don't count for much in Hangtown. "You just get out with your pick and

shovel and dig—that's all. P'raps you'll find gold; p'raps not. It's all luck."

He waved his pipe toward the hillside above his cabin—a hillside torn and furrowed and honeycombed by hundreds of burrowing gold-seekers.

"There's a lawyer up there," Old Kentuck went on, "who's been diggin' holes like a rabbit for nigh onto a year, and he ain't cleaned up more'n enough for his grub. And in the next hole to him is a heathen Chinee—an ignorant crittur that don't even know how to read—who fished out fifteen hundred dollars last month. I reckon this ain't the right town for that lawyer, son. He could make more back where he come from. But it's the right town for that heathen Chinee, and for me, too. I'm a child of luck, I am. Lived on it all my life—ever since the day I found a pot of old money buried in a field back home. There was nigh to three hundred dollars in that pot, and me bein' not much more'n a boy it seemed like a pretty big pile. I quit thinkin' about work that very day, and took to thinkin' about luck instead. And it's luck I've been countin' on ever since to get me ahead in the world. Sometimes a little bit of it comes to me, and sometimes it don't; but I'm waitin' for the day when it'll come big—when I'll make my big strike and won't have to count on even luck no more."

Tuck pondered Kentuck's philosophy as he

watched the smoke from the fortune hunter's pipe drifting upward through the clear, sun-washed air of the Sierra foothills. He wondered how long Kentuck had been chasing the will-o'-the-wisp. Thirty years probably. He did not look like an old man—not more than fifty—but he seemed old in Hangtown, for the men who had followed the trail of '49 to the gold fields were almost all young, many of them scarcely more than boys, and Tuck was not the only seventeen-year-old adventurer in that camp by any means. Depending on luck didn't seem to have been very profitable for the grizzled Kentuckian. Thirty years of it, and now he was as poor as if he were just starting out in life. The idea of depending on luck as Kentuck had been doing did not appeal very strongly to Tuck Simms just then as he thought of the long, hard journey he had made from Missouri and recalled the hundreds of disappointed, homeward-bound gold-hunters he had met on his way into the hills from Sacramento City.

"How many of 'em strike it big?" Tuck asked.

"Mighty few, son—mighty few," Kentuck replied, as he watched the grubbers on the hill. "One out of a hundred, I reckon—mebbe less. But luck comes to most all of 'em in driblets if they stick here long enough. I've been averagin' ten dollars a day myself, which is better'n most of 'em are doin'."

Tuck's heart sank. Finding gold in California didn't seem so easy as the stories told back East had led people to believe. "It don't seem hardly worth while," he decided, "for all those men to be comin' a couple o' thousand miles or more just to grub round for that much money."

Kentuck puffed his pipe silently for a moment while his gaze roamed over hills and valley sprinkled with gold-seekers and their tents and cabins. "Mebbe, son, mebbe," he said at last. "But don't forget the one feller in a hundred that makes the big strike. P'raps that one feller will be you or me some time. That's the idee that keeps all these critturs goin'. They're all thinkin' luck's goin' to hit 'em. They ain't none of 'em countin' on bein' among the ninety-nine out of a hundred that's disappointed. Neither am I. And I got a sort of feelin' that luck's goin' to turn my way pretty soon now. There's a place over in the next ravine that looks good to me, and I'm goin' to give it a try in the mornin'. Nobody's bothered about it yet, and this hollow here don't seem to be good for much more'n livin' wages. Want to come along? You've just got here and might as well begin in a new spot."

Tuck jumped at the chance. "Mind if I bring my friends along?" he asked. "There's Jeff Quantrell, and old Ezra Bellamy and a kid named Job Danby down below on the flats. We've been

travelin' together, and I reckon they'd like to try in a new place, too."

Kentuck nodded assent. "Sure," he said. "Bring 'em along. There's room enough over there for all of us. And, son, does any of your party happen to have any readin' matter? No? Not a line? Well, that's where luck's turned plumb agin me. There ain't nothin' to read in this here camp but Bibles and almanacs. I been here six months and read the Bible through seventeen times for'ards and back'ards. And that almanac o' mine! Say, boy, I've read that blamed thing for'ards, back'ards, sideways and upside down, till I can locate the signs o' the Zodiac blindfolded, calc'late an eclipse standin' on my head, and forecast the weather and prognosticate the value o' the country's crops for the next ten years."

Tuck recalled that he did have a mere scrap of reading matter, a handbill offering a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of a man who had robbed the express company's office at Sacramento City. He thought it might be a welcome change from the almanac and the Bible, so he mentioned it.

"Just the kind of stuff I like to read," cried Kentuck. "Bring it along and I'll sure be grateful. It'll do me a heap o' good to get some

variety in my literatoor. Who's the crittur they're lookin' for? Any name given?"

"Name's Sutton."

Kentuck gave an almost imperceptible start. "Sutton?" he echoed, suddenly looking very serious. "What's the rest of it? Any first name?"

"Dunno as I recollect."

" 'Twan't Bart?"

"That was it—Bart Sutton."

A steely glitter had come into Kentuck's eyes, and his teeth fastened savagely upon the pipe-stem. "What's the description? Tall, round-shouldered, red-headed?"

Tuck scratched his head by way of refreshing his memory. "As I recollect, that's just about the way it read," he answered. "How'd you guess it?"

Kentuck swore softly to himself. "The same Bart Sutton!" he exclaimed. "The same ornery cur that trimmed me out of all I had. Son, I wouldn't need no five hundred dollars reward to get that varmint. I'd put a bullet through him soon as I laid eyes on him. That'd be satisfaction enough for me. Me and him was pardners oncet pearl huntin' down South, and when we'd cleaned up a little pile he lit out with every cent of it. Left me dead busted, without even the price of a meal. Ten long years ago that was, and I hain't seen hide nor hair of him since, but

when I do he'd better say his prayers in a hurry, 'cause I'm sure goin' to drill a hole through him."

Tuck walked down into the hollow to the spot where he and his friends had pitched a tent, and told of Kentuck's offer. The verdict was unanimous that it should be accepted. Quantrell had been studying conditions in the gulch where most of Hangtown's population were at work, and was not satisfied with what he learned. He could see scarcely any hope there of earning much more than a living. Any man who dug up even ten dollars a day couldn't save much, for food prices were very high. The Eldorado Hotel charged a dollar for an order of baked beans, and three dollars for a square meal. Quantrell declared that he hadn't come all the way from Missouri just to burrow in the ground like a mole for a mere living, and that if hunting gold wasn't worth while he would find something that was. He had learned that a Portuguese sailor had recently found gold worth sixty thousand dollars in a sandbar on the American River. A find like that would be worth all the hardships and dangers of the journey across the continent, but that was one chance in a thousand.

The following morning Kentuck led the way to the ravine where he had set his hopes. The method of mining was very simple. They set to work with picks and shovels, each in a hole of

his own, Kentuck explaining that they would have to get down to bed-rock before they could hope to find anything.

Thrilled by this first attempt to find riches, Tuck worked as if his life depended on it. He had dug down about four feet when he saw in the deepest part of the hole what looked like yellow sand scattered through the earth and gravel. His heart gave a jump. He was not sure, but it might be gold.

"Kentuck!" he called. "Take a look at this."

Kentuck climbed out of his hole, and came running.

"You've struck it, son," was the old-timer's verdict. "It's gold for sure. But don't get too hopeful. Mebbe there's no more than a few dollars here."

Filling a sack with earth from the bottom of the hole, Kentuck packed it on his back to the creek which ran a few yards below. There he showed Tuck how to separate the gold by cradling the contents of the sack. The earth and gravel were washed away, while the particles of gold, being the heaviest, sank to the bottom of the pan.

"It's running rich," Kentuck announced after a few minutes of this work while the others stood around watching eagerly. "Pack some more of the stuff down to me, son, and I'll wash it out."

Tuck brought to him load after load of the

"YOU'VE STRUCK IT, SON," WAS THE OLD TIMER'S VERDICT.

Tuck Square, Forty Nines

earth that lay within three or four inches of the bed-rock, and the old fortune hunter, crouching over the water, worked steadily on with his cradle. Now and then he poured a little stream of gold-dust into a tin can. By the time the cradling failed to produce results the can was half full. Kentuck stood it on the palm of his hand and hefted it.

"A leetle more'n two pounds, I should say," he decided. "Five hundred dollars. Boy, that's going some for one mornin'. Better hang on to it careful, for there's no tellin' how long it'll be before you'll find another speck o' the stuff. Just a streak o' luck."

He passed the can to Tuck, whose eyes were sparkling with excitement. Five hundred dollars for a morning's work! Tuck saw visions of wealth. But the old-timer beside him gave a cynical smile, knowing the evasiveness of luck and the disappointments that come to those that depend on it.

Tuck dug another hole, which proved a failure, but he was far from being discouraged—not after such a wonderful morning. His spirits were high; he was sure he was on the road to fortune. By the end of the day his companions had found scarcely enough gold to pay them for their trouble. Kentuck's washings were worth about twelve dollars, while none of the others had found

as much. When at last they swung their tools on their backs and strolled back to Hangtown they determined to try again in the same place the following day. It seemed worth while after such a find as Tuck had made.

Tuck carried his can gingerly, fearful of stumbling and spilling some of the precious contents. It was dangerous stuff to handle, it seemed to him. A sudden gust of wind might blow a part of it away.

"You don't want to carry that stuff in the can, son," Kentuck warned him, pulling out an empty buckskin bag from his pocket. "Pour it in this, and we'll hike right over to the Eldorado, where Bill Coggins, the proprietor, will buy all that's brought to him at sixteen dollars an ounce. I better go along to see that Bill don't skin yer. Bill's a square cuss in most things, but dern careless when it comes to weighin' gold."

Spread on the floor under Bill Coggins's scales was a piece of smooth, white cloth. That cloth meant two hundred dollars a month to Bill, who had realized after a few weeks of experience in Hangtown that a lot of gold dust was going to waste on his floor. There was sure to be some spilled in the weighing, and after the cloth had been brought into service it was found that the spillings amounted to a good deal, to so much in fact that Bill contrived to spill more than ever.

He was getting more and more nervous every day, his hand more and more shaky. Indeed his hand trembled as if he were suffering from palsy as he poured Tuck's dust into the scales.

"Steady, now, Bill," warned Kentuck. "I'm watchin' this here operation. Mebbe you've got ague, and chills and fever and paralysis and all that you allow you're sufferin' from, but I won't stand for more'n ten dollars bein' spilled on that floor o' yourn."

"Five hundred and twenty dollars," Bill announced. He counted out ten fifty-dollar octagonal slugs and two ten-dollar gold pieces, and passed them to Tuck.

"I reckon that's somewheres near right," said Kentuck, evidently satisfied. "Come on, son. You got a pretty good nest egg there for a fortune."

They passed out into the night, Tuck bound for his tent, the old-timer for his cabin.

"I'm goin' to sit up for a spell with my candle this evenin'," said Kentuck, "readin' that handbill you brung me. It'll sure seem mighty good to have somethin' new to read; and I'm obleeged to yer. If ever I can do yer another good turn just lemme know."

CHAPTER XVIII

LUCK

The next morning found all five of them hard at work again in the ravine. Indeed they were there for many a day afterward, sometimes meeting with a little success, sometimes with none. The best day that any of them had was when Kentuck dug up a little more than fifty dollars. Quantrell was getting discouraged. He had been watching Bill Coggins and the store-keepers.

"Those men don't deal with luck," he observed. "The Eldorado's a gold mine that don't peter out, and so are the stores. They're sure things. I've discovered that the wise man in this country, as everywhere else, is the one that leaves luck alone."

A loud laugh came from Kentuck, who had just climbed out of his hole. "You don't know whatcher talkin' about, Jeff," he cried. "I've just struck it rich. Come right over here and I'll prove it."

They all hurried over to the hole in which Ken-

tuck had been working. The gravel at the bottom seemed fairly to blaze with gold.

"Luck!" cried the old-timer, his voice hoarse with excitement. "This is what luck's done at last for me, boys! It's the big strike I've been waitin' for—the strike that's goin' to make me rich. Luck! Don't tell me luck ain't worth tryin' for."

It was a big strike, sure enough. There was no doubt of that. In two hours Kentuck had washed out at least twenty pounds of pure gold, and the hole seemed as rich as ever. The rest turned in and helped him. It was a find that would be the gossip of Hangtown for many a day. Tuck felt as if he must be dreaming. He had never seen such riches before. And it was all coming out of a hole in the ground. It was amazing. It was all so easy—so easy to get rich when luck just turned loose and helped a man.

It began to grow dark. They worked until they could no longer see the bottom of the hole, then gathered up their tools for the night, leaving none of them knew how much gold still to be dug out. Kentuck estimated the pile they had washed out already at more than thirty pounds, worth about six thousand dollars according to the prevailing price in Hangtown.

"Enough for one day," he exclaimed joyfully. "Back again to-morrow. Oh, I'm on the road to

bein' rich all right. Another day like this and I'll be plumb satisfied. Luck! Oh, I ain't depended on luck all my life for nothin'."

Old Kentuck's dreams of a lifetime were coming true indeed, for it turned out that there was at least six thousand dollars more in the wonder-hole he had dug. It was not until almost dark the next day that they came to the end of the golden stream, and Kentuck figured that the day's profits were nearer seven thousand dollars than six—thirteen thousand dollars in all.

"That's a stake that'll keep me in comfort back in old Missouri till the end of my days," he declared. "Didn't I say I was a child o' luck. Born lucky, even though the big strike was a long time comin'. There's only one thing more I hanker for now, and that's to come face to face with that thievin', red-headed varmint that cleaned me out ten years back. And mebbe I will, seein' that he's prowlin' round hereabouts. That's all I'll ask of luck now—the chance to meet that ornery, slippery crittur."

That evening, while tents and cabin windows, scattered through the gulch, glowed with candle light, the whole camp was talking of Old Kentuck's big strike. Sitting in his office in the Eldorado was Bill Coggins, to whom the news had been particularly pleasing. He was waiting for Kentuck, and already his hands were beginning

to tremble with the expectancy of weighing the lucky miner's gold. Bill figured that if he could only be careless enough at the scales his rake-off from Kentuck's big pile would amount to considerable.

Presently the man he had been expecting so eagerly walked in, with Tuck Simms close at his heels. Each was burdened with a heavy sack, and Bill's eyes glistened at the sight.

"How's yer paralysis to-night, Bill?" demanded Kentuck, though not in the tone of one who inquires after another's health from polite or sympathetic motives.

Bill shook his head and sighed. "Bad—pretty bad," he answered.

Kentuck threw both sacks on the table, and opened them. Each was filled with a number of small, buckskin pouches bulging with gold-dust. "Well, Bill, don't let it get too bad while you're doin' this weighin'," he warned with a menacing look in his eyes. "Too much spillin' and I'll sure have to add some to that paralysis."

Bill opened one of the buckskin bags, and poured the contents on the scales, where it formed a beautiful, gleaming cone under the light of the hanging lamp. "Luck's been comin' your way all right," he remarked sadly.

Kentuck grinned. "Everythin' I want comes my way sooner or later, Bill," he returned.

"Luck! Why, luck's my middle name. There's only one thing I want——"

Suddenly Kentuck's mouth gaped wide open and a startled look came into his eyes. He was staring hard at a stranger who had just strolled into the room—a tall, round-shouldered, red-haired man.

"Sutton!" roared Kentuck.

The stranger's hand flew to his hip, but Kentuck was a half second quicker in making the same motion. A shot rang out, and Red-head staggered against the wall. But instead of falling he recovered himself the next instant, and another shot rang through the room. It was Red-head's pistol this time that had spoken.

Kentuck's legs bent under him, his gun dropped clattering to the floor, and he fell forward and lay still. Bill Coggins ran forward and lifted him up, but the old-timer whom fortune had smiled upon was in no need of help. "Dead!" said Bill solemnly. "Dead as a stone."

Red-head shook himself anxiously. He knew he had been hit, but he was puzzled by the fact that he felt no pain and could find no wound. He slipped his fingers into a pocket of his vest, and muttered an oath as he pulled out a heavy silver watch, the case of which was deeply dented. Kentuck's bullet had struck the watch at just the right angle to be turned in its course. It had come out

through the back of the vest and had struck the wall.

"That's what I call luck!" cried Red-head. "It's a thing that wouldn't happen once in a thousand times. Luck! There's nothin' like it."

Almost at the same moment a man with a huge silver badge on the front of his vest came hurrying into the room, gun in hand.

"Throw up your hands, Sutton!" he cried. "I've got you dead to rights this time."

Red-head, taken by surprise, obeyed on the instant.

The man with the badge glanced at the body on the floor. "Too bad I didn't get here a little sooner," he said, "but my horse got a stone in his foot comin' up from Sacramento City and it delayed me a good hour. Funny the way luck runs."

Bill Coggins nodded his head sagely. "Mighty funny," he assented. "Say, what am I goin' to do with all this gold?"

The man with the badge rubbed his chin as he tried to solve this problem. "Well," he answered at last, "the boys in this camp will have to try to hunt up this dead feller's relations, and if he ain't got none the stuff will go to the town, I reckon. Looks like a big strike. Luck was sure with him."

"Luck!" muttered Tuck Simms to himself.

"Luck! I reckon it ain't worth while dependin' on what folks call luck."

And that same evening he announced to Quantrell that he had decided to find some surer way of making a living than digging for gold.

"You're right, son," Quantrell agreed. "This kind of thing's nothing but a gamble. The men who are going to make fortunes in this country are going to rely on something more than luck. They're going to make for themselves far more than an even chance with every bummer who can handle a pick and spade. I'm going to capitalize my experience in the Santa Fe trade by starting a general store down at Sacramento City, and I'll give you a chance to make good in it. Will you come?"

"Sure I'll come," said Tuck.

* * * * * * *

Half a century ago the firm of Quantrell & Simms was widely known in California. There were stores bearing that name not only in Sacramento but in San Francisco, with branches in smaller cities. The head of the firm, a white-haired, distinguished-looking man, retired from the business a few years after the Civil War, and spent his old age on a ranch in the Santa Clara Valley, where he was fond of entertaining visitors with tales of his adventures on the old Santa Fe

Trail and with the Forty-niners. His former partner, Tuck Simms, carried on the business for many a year afterward, and established himself so firmly and so shrewdly that in the panic following the failure of the great Bank of California in the '70's he was able to come to the relief of many of his hard-pressed friends and save them from ruin. One day a shabby but hale and hearty sun-browned man called on him at his office in San Francisco.

"Remember me?" asked the caller.

Tuck Simms put on his spectacles to study the visitor more closely. "Well, well!" he exclaimed at last. "It's Job Danby!"

"Yep, that's me," said Job. "Same old Job, a little out o' luck and gettin' a little gray, but with lots o' go still left in him. Off to prospect for silver in Colorado soon as I can raise the railroad fare, and I got a notion that I'm goin' to strike it rich at last. You know, me and old Bellamy cleaned up five thousand dollars between us at Hangtown just after you and Quantrell left, and we never could bring ourselves to give up diggin' holes in the ground after such luck as that. Poor old Ezra died flat busted over in Nevada three years later, but just as full of hope as ever; and I've been chasin' gold strikes and silver strikes ever since. Mebbe if I hadn't been so darned lucky at Hangtown I'd have a nice,

snug little payin' business somewhere by now, but when luck's been so good to a feller once, he hates to give up relyin' on it."

Tuck slipped a hand under his coat, and brought out a fat wallet. "Luck's coming your way to-day, Job, anyhow," he declared. "For the sake of old times I'm going to give you your fare to Colorado and enough for grubstake besides."

Then, as the merchant gazed dreamily at the office window, his thoughts went back to Hangtown, and to Old Kentuck. He hardly heard Job thanking him, so absorbed was he in memories.

"Old pal," said Tuck Simms, after a long silence, "the luckiest day in my life was when I learned to let luck alone."

THE END

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Not only has this author had many experiences as a flyer: a list of his activities while knocking around the country includes postal clerk, hobo, actor, writer, mutton chop salesman, preacher, roughneck in the oil fields, newspaper man, flyer, scenario writer in Hollywood and synthetic clown with the Sells-Floto circus. Having lived an active, daring life and possessing a gift for good story telling he is well qualified to write these adventures of a red-blooded daredevil young American who became one of the country's greatest flyers.

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